



• PLUCKY •



IRL •



BY •

• MAY BALDWIN •



Nell in a very pretty demi-toilet . . . walked to the door of the
P. G. dining-hall. PAGE 106.

A PLUCKY GIRL

OR

THE ADVENTURES OF 'MISS NELL'

BY

MAY BALDWIN

AUTHOR OF

'A POPULAR GIRL'

*WITH SIX ILLUSTRATIONS BY
JESSIE MACGREGOR*

LONDON AND EDINBURGH

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A POPULAR GIRL; OR, BOARDING SCHOOL DAYS.

By MAY BALDWIN.

With Six Illustrations by Jessie Wilson.

‘Among the very best stories for schoolgirls which have come under our notice is *A Popular Girl*, in which Miss Baldwin tells how Fay Fairholme went to school at Munich and all that befell her there. . . . Fräulein Luise, the mistress of the school, is a charming character.’—*Daily Chronicle*.

TO MY FRIEND,
MRS DOUGLAS WATSON.

*Sudden the Worst turns the Best to the Brave,
The black minute's at end!
And the Elements rage, the fiend-voices that rave
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become—first a Peace out of Pain,
Then a light, then thy breast.
O Thou Soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!*

BROWNING.

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A PLUCKY GIRL.

CHAPTER I.

GOOD NEWS.



‘URRAH! Hurrah! Hooray! Nell! Nell, wake up and hear the news, the great and glorious news. Nell!’ in loud and prolonged tones, as no immediate answer was heard.

The Nell thus rudely wakened out of sleep promptly sat up in bed, and called out to the voice in the passage :

‘Well, what is it? Something extra important, I should hope, to make up for being awakened by such a hideous, not to say plebeian, noise.’

‘Hideous noise, indeed!’ replied the breezy voice of the first speaker, who was none other than the wife of the curate-in-charge of Berkstead, as she abruptly opened her sister’s door and held some letters high in the air. ‘Is it thus you designate the dulcet tones of my voice, unsympathetic sister that you are? Now you shall not hear the news till breakfast-time, just as a punishment.’ With that young Mrs Paul walked or rather danced out of the room and into her children’s nursery, and shut the door, from whence she was heard indulging in wild romps with her two little ones.

‘Much I care,’ muttered the younger and unmarried sister to herself, as she sat up in bed hugging her knees. Not that she meant to be unsympathetic, or that the remonstrance came with a particularly good grace from her, seeing that she herself was one of the noisiest of the noisy; but she was a highly sensitive girl, and was at this moment supposed to be recruiting in this quiet parsonage after a nervous collapse, or, as she declared, an overdose of society.

‘Who would think,’ she continued, still with herself as sole audience, ‘that those ear-splitting sounds came from a parson’s wife, and she the mother of two children? Upon my word, I really do think she ought to be toned down after six years of matrimony with the most proper, most refined—and I must own gentlemanly—man I know.’

That ‘I must own’ told a tale, and was a concession to justice; for Nell, or—to call her, as people very seldom did, by her proper name—Eleanor Lestrangle, was no great admirer of her sister’s excellent husband. She was always demanding from herself or others an explanation of the fact that her high-spirited, handsome sister Basilia had chosen to wed this long, lank, black-haired, grave-faced curate, who with his heavy black moustache looked so unclerical, when she might have married ‘some much jollier man,’ as Miss Nell put it.

But Basilia’s mother smiled quietly when her younger daughter addressed her impatient question to her. It would have been no use to tell the girl that her sister had married for that best of all things—love, for love was an unknown quality to Nell as yet. So Mrs Lestrangle contented herself with saying, ‘My dear, your sister has made an excellent choice, and one which you will learn in time to appreciate.’ To which, and to all similar remarks, Nell invariably replied

that Peter Paul—‘Heavens, what a name!’ she ejaculated on first hearing it, and no one can call it euphonious—was a good, douce man, there was no denying that, but no mate for Basil; for thus did they soften down Basilia Paul’s none too pretty name.

All this time Eleanor Lestrangle, despite her remark anent ‘not caring,’ had been dressing hastily, even for her, never very dilatory over that process; for she was very curious to hear her sister’s news.

Arrived at the breakfast-table, she saw signs of unwonted excitement even on the usually serene brow of her brother-in-law.

‘Good - morning, Peter. — Good - morning again, Basil. What’s the latest?’ she asked; but even as she said this she felt the futility of the question, for nothing short of an earthquake—if that, Nell was wont to say—would cause the Reverend Peter Paul to enter upon any secular business before family prayers.

‘Hubby, dear, I really don’t think I can attend to prayers this morning; I’m so “cited,” as Rosie says. Do let’s have breakfast first and pray afterwards just for to-day.’

Mr Paul’s brows contracted as if with pain, and his forehead became a mass of wrinkles. The irreverence of the remark shocked him, as his wife’s unconventional ways often did. He merely said, in his well-bred, gentle voice, ‘Surely to-day, of all days, we need family prayers, Basil; and you won’t be any the worse for a little quieting down, in my opinion.’

This utterance, though it was but an echo of her own thoughts, caused Nell much indignation. She and Basil contented themselves with pantomimic questions and answers during the few minutes they were waiting for the

two maid-servants and the children to come in. As Mrs Paul's explanations consisted in opening her mouth wide and then screwing it up into odd shapes, and waving her arms about wildly, while she expressed general satisfaction and delight by vigorous nods and wags of her head and grins, all conducted behind her husband's back, Nell was rather relieved than otherwise when prayers began, and they all composed themselves, outwardly at least, to worship.

As Nell sat there, her glance fell upon her brother-in-law seated at the head of the table, with his three-year-old little boy on his knees. She observed him more attentively than she usually did. For the first time she was struck by the look of goodness on his face.

'I do not believe that man could do a wicked thing if he tried. I wonder if he ever did?' she found herself soliloquising instead of attending to what Mr Paul was reading, and she recovered herself with a start to hear the chairs being pushed back preparatory to the family kneeling down for prayer.

'Now, for goodness' sake, hurry up and tell me your news, one of you—you, Peter, by preference.—As for your grimaces, Basil, for they were nothing else, all they conveyed to my mind was a sad conviction that you were offered a refuge in a lunatic asylum, which you were glad to accept.'

This remark came from Nell before the servants were well out of the room, or her brother-in-law, who was always deliberate in his movements, well off his knees.

Mr Paul looked reproachful, but was too polite to rebuke his guest; and, before he had time to reply to his sister-in-law's impatient question, his wife had interposed. Mounting on a chair, she said in shrill, excited tones, 'Behold the vicaress-elect of Barton, of St John's, Barchester, or of

St Gabriel's, Camford. Hooray!' and Mrs Paul began an impromptu Highland fling upon the chair.

'Basil, Basil!' expostulated her husband, 'come down; pray, come down at once. What can you be thinking of? What an example for the children—not to mention our new stamped-velvet chairs!'

'Oh, well, for the sake of the morals of our new stamped-velvet chairs, I will descend,' remarked his wife, jumping down and giving the aforesaid velvet a hasty smooth; 'but as for the children, bless them!'—and she caught the two little mites, who stood gazing open-mouthed with delight at this new game of mammy's, in her arms—"they don't take no notice of their ma," as Thomas the gardener says; "they go by what Mr Paul he says."'

'What does she mean, Peter?' asked Nell of her brother-in-law.

'She means, Nell, that after waiting ten years for promotion we have this morning received three separate offers of livings: one, the living of Barton in Blankshire; another the Rectory of St John's, in the manufacturing town of Barchester; and the third the Vicarage of St Gabriel's, in my old university town, a rich living in the gift of my college.'

'How lovely!' exclaimed Nell, 'how perfectly lovely! And of course you'll take St Gabriel's, and I shall come and stay with you, and go to lectures, and have a glorious time with the undergraduates, and boat-races, and rows and things. It's what I've longed for for years,' she wound up.

Mr Paul smiled good-naturedly, but only replied quietly, 'We have not decided yet. Basil and I have not talked or thought the matter over so far. In fact, as soon as she had read the letters she rushed off to you in great excitement,

and I have not got a sensible word out of her since.' This with a slightly injured air and wrinkled forehead.

Apparently Mrs Paul felt it incumbent upon her to show some dignity in view of the responsible positions in prospect, for she now remarked : 'If you think we're going to choose a living just because it will enable you to flirt with young men and mix yourself up with rows'—with a disgusted emphasis on the word 'rows'—'you are much mistaken both in Peter and me.'

'Fiddle !' replied Nell, not in the least crushed. 'You'd like nothing better yourself, Mrs Basil, and of course you'll end by taking it. What's Barton? Only an insignificant village at the other end of England; and St John's, Barchester, is in a filthy manufacturing town, which would kill you in a year, let alone being bad for these poor dear children. Why, you've got no choice. Why not settle at once and be done with it?'

Nell intercepted a look from Mrs Paul to her husband; her heart sank. A conviction was dawning upon her that whichever of the three was chosen it would not be the rich college living at Camford, and visions of delightful social life in a university town slowly faded from her mind's eye.

'Well,' she said at last rather shortly, 'you'll do as you please, of course; but if you go to Barchester you will die of dirt, and if you go to Barton you will die of ennui. And now I leave you to make your choice; only for goodness' sake make up your mind before lunch-time, as I can't be kept in suspense for an indefinite length of time.—Come along, infants, I am going to take you out for a long goat-drive,' by which she meant a drive in their little goat-carriage, 'while mother and father are settling by which death they prefer to die;' and Nell went off with her

five-year-old niece Rosie hanging on to one hand and little three-year-old Mansfield toddling along and holding on to one finger of the other hand.

Meanwhile, Mrs Paul, having hastily given all the necessary orders for the day, repaired to her husband's study to confer with him on the momentous question as to what their future life was to be.

For the six years of their married life Mr and Mrs Paul had had an incessant struggle with a kind of poverty which is perhaps only known in the family of a clergyman of the Anglican Church, of good birth, used to the comforts and perhaps luxuries of life. The young couple who found the position of curate and curate's wife intolerable jumped at the offer of a sole charge in a small country village.

'Oh, Pete!' said his wife, 'think what it will be to have no vicar's wife domineering over one and giving one wholesome advice alternated with judicious snubbings!'

The Reverend Peter Paul did think that though he, if left to himself, got on remarkably well with his vicar and vicar's wife, yet it would certainly be a relief to end the guerilla warfare at present waged between the houses of the two clergymen. So they moved from the cathedral town, in which Mr Paul's first curacy was, to a village some twenty miles distant from the town and five miles from a station.

Then their troubles began, and the allowances from their respective homes, which were not large, seemed to be less as their family increased. The distance from a station naturally necessitated some kind of carriage and beast of burden. Mrs Paul pooh-poohed the consideration of expense, and suggested a donkey; but Mr Paul was a sensitive man, and not above minding the comments of neighbours; and after a few jaunts in the pretty little donkey-carriage, which jaunts were not

successful for various reasons, he avowed his firm intention of never going in the donkey-carriage again. As he liked walking, and had on more than one occasion walked to their common destination in less time than Mrs Paul had driven in her donkey-carriage, he may be excused for his decision. The donkey was accordingly sold, and a pony hired when the distance was beyond a walk. But in a scattered neighbourhood this was frequently the case; and, as Mr Paul, who was a sociable man, said, they must give up their equals or pay calls at the rate of five shillings or more each; which is a serious consideration to a man who is expected to put his hand in his pocket on all occasions, and withal to keep up the appearance of a gentleman and a gentleman's establishment, and yet is provided with very little more than a skilled mechanic earns, and sometimes not so much.

CHAPTER II.

THE DECISION.



LUNCHEON time came, but no Nell. Mrs Paul, who was still sitting with her husband in his study when the first luncheon-gong sounded, looked up at the clock in surprise. In spite of her high spirits and general harum-scarum unconventional ways, Mrs Paul was an excellent housewife, and everything went like clockwork at the little 'curatage,' as they called it, which accounts for her being able on this particular occasion to give up the whole morning to her husband and the important decision they had to make.

'Why, hubby,' she exclaimed in surprise, 'it is one o'clock! How quiet Nell is with those children.'

'From what I know of your sister, I should say that she has not returned, or we should not be enjoying this unwonted quiet,' returned her husband, with a quiet but good-humoured sarcasm which was characteristic of his customary attitude to his more lively wife and her sister.

'Not returned?' echoed his wife blankly. 'Why'—after a rapid mental calculation—'they would have been out three hours at that rate! You don't imagine Nell has been walking by that goat-carriage all this time! She would be dead simply, unless'—anxiously—'they have met with an accident.'

'Much more probably Billy has lain down and refused to

move,' remarked Mr Paul consolingly. 'The ways of that beast are not to be reckoned on, far less controlled.'

'Good gracious!' ejaculated his wife, 'what a Job's comforter you are! Suppose they are stuck somewhere miles off, and Billy is lying down and won't move; and suppose a carriage comes along and runs over them—or anything; and poor Nell, who can't walk half-a-mile'——

'In which case she can scarcely be miles off,' interrupted the curate-in-charge; 'and suppose I see them coming in at the gate at this moment.'

Mrs Paul looked out of the study window, and with an ejaculation of thankfulness ran to the front door.

'Goodness me, children!' she cried to the still distant trio, waving them on with her hand. Come on! Lunch is ready and waiting. Where have you all been? I've been dreadfully alarmed about you. I've only just discovered that you were still out. You must be dead, Nell.'

'I'm not dead,' said Nell, who on closer inspection appeared very heated and tired, not to say a little cross. 'But I wish this brute were,' she added, with anything but an affectionate look at the goat, which she was dragging rather than leading along. 'And as for being alarmed; much you troubled yourself about us, seeing that we've been out three blessed hours and you never even missed us.'

'We's had a most awful drive, muver,' said little Rosie Paul, with wide-open blue eyes. 'Billy simply *wouldn't* go when we got to Park's Lane, an' I pulled, an' pulled, *an'* pulled at the reins, and Auntie Nell hit him, an' hit him, an' hit and called him, oh, mos' awfil names! An' then he lay down, an' so did Auntie Nell, an' ate a lot of letter.'

'Goodness, Nell! I hope you have not been making any such spectacle of yourself,' cried her sister.

‘Spectacle!’ said Nell wrathfully. ‘Yes, we have been making spectacles of ourselves; but that has been thanks to your beast of a goat, which stuck in the middle of Park’s Lane, and refused to get up to let a carriage and pair pass by, or to turn round, or do anything except butt, which it did most vigorously as soon as any one came near.’

‘Oh, Peter!’ shrieked his wife, ‘do come and hear all about these adventures Nell has been having with my innocent babes. It has all happened just as I supposed to you. Billy lay down and refused to move, and they got stuck, and a carriage came along, and—— Did it run over you? I’m sure it ran over you. Do say it did,’ she wound up beseechingly.

‘No, it did not,’ said Nell viciously. ‘I wish it had. My back aches villainously, and my arms feel as if they were dislocated dragging that evil-natured brute of yours along.’

‘Well, what did happen?’ asked her sister; ‘for so far you and Billy and the carriage and pair—I only hope it was no one we know—are or ought to be stuck in Park’s Lane, eating letters, whatever that may mean.’

All this while Mrs Paul was unpacking her little girl and boy and patting in parentheses the much-abused Billy, who stood there looking if not amiable at least inoffensive.

‘What happened was that the footman, seeing the obstruction in front of his carriage, descended first and tried politely but firmly to remove us, or rather Billy; who, being thus forcibly dragged to his feet, promptly retired. Then he held the horses’ heads while the portly coachman laboriously clambered down from his seat and tried his hand on Billy; but, however good he may be at horses, goats are evidently not within his scope, and he retired routed, and I don’t doubt inwardly swearing.’

‘This tale is evidently going to last some time,’ remarked Mrs Paul. ‘Come and finish it at luncheon-table.’

‘Well,’ she continued when seated, ‘pray proceed. You and Billy were lying down eating paper; and what were the occupants of the carriage doing meanwhile—if there were any occupants, that is to say?’

‘Nonsense,’ said Nell, still rather crossly. ‘Don’t be absurd. You don’t suppose I remained flat on the ground for an unlimited space of time?’

‘Personally,’ rejoined her sister, ‘when young women take to lying down in muddy lanes I do not see how one is to prophesy with any certainty what their actions will be without knowing what prompted them to such an unusual course of action.’

‘The law of gravitation, or repulsion, prompted me very violently by the agency of that abandoned Billy, who pushed me down. As for the occupants of the carriage—I was up before they came upon the scene—they were two ladies and one young man, the which young man now came to my assistance, and he got Billy to one side by dint, as Rosie has already remarked, of offering him the entire contents of his pocket-book—that is, he held out a piece of paper and retreated, and Billy followed him, munching it. When the paper stopped, Billy stopped. He, the young man I mean, walked with us as far as the end of Park’s Lane, and left me with a newspaper to feed Billy with, by the aid of which I am now here.’

‘Do you mean to say that my precious Billy has got a whole newspaper, not to say other miscellaneous literature, inside him?’

‘Yes I do,’ said Nell callously; ‘and I’m sure I hope they’ll be his death. That goat-carriage of yours, Basil, is perfectly absurd, and a public nuisance.’

‘I hope it was a respectable paper,’ said Mrs Paul gravely, ignoring Nell’s comments on the goat-carriage. ‘Did you notice the name?’

Mr Paul looked up curiously. ‘What has the name to do with it?’ he very naturally inquired.

‘A great deal,’ said his wife. ‘Suppose it’s a Radical paper? We shall have Billy corrupted, and doing all sorts of revolutionary things.’

Mr Paul laughed quietly.

‘I shouldn’t worry about that,’ said Nell sarcastically, ‘seeing that Billy’s present views, if Conservative, did not prevent him from barricading the public highway to a coroneted carriage and pair; therefore they are not of much practical use.’

Mr Paul looked from one to the other. In his quiet way he enjoyed the fun and nonsense of his wife and sister, provided it did not become too noisy or pass the bounds of seemliness, and even then he was sorely tried before he remonstrated with them. He now turned to Nell, and said, ‘We have practically settled upon our future abode, Nell. Don’t you want to know which it is to be?’

‘No,’ said Nell shortly. ‘I know without being told.’

Basil Paul smiled to herself. The reason of Nell’s long tale about the goat was explained. ‘Well, which is it then?’ she demanded.

‘That filthy manufacturing town, of course, where I shall never come to see you; so make up your mind to that, Basil.’

‘Wrong,’ said her sister triumphantly. ‘I knew you’d guess that; but you are just wrong for once. Neither Peter nor I could stand a manufacturing town for long, and to take two delicate children to such a place would be madness.’

‘Which is it, then?’

‘We think that Barton, which is a very large village, with three thousand inhabitants, and a beautiful church, will be best for us,’ put in Mr Paul. ‘There will be plenty of work, but not too much, and just the sort of work I like; and it is a healthy neighbourhood, and—— In short, we are going to-morrow to see what it is like, and hear all about it from the present vicar; and if it is all it seems, we shall in all human probability go there.’

‘I hope you’ll like it.—Pass the salt, please, Rosie, unless you want it all yourself,’ was Nell’s ungracious reception of the news.

Mr Paul looked up rather hurt at this want of sympathy on the part of his sister-in-law, of whom he was very fond; but his wife made a sign to him not to take any notice, and said casually, ‘There are flourishing cricket and football clubs, judging from the parish magazine, which the patrons very thoughtfully forwarded to us; and they each give an annual ball about Christmas. You must come and grace these affairs, Nell.’

‘Not I,’ said Nell firmly. ‘Two balls to fifty-two mothers’ meetings, to say nothing of choir treats and village Christmas-trees, is not my idea of a Christmas visit.’

‘Upon my word!’ replied Mrs Paul, justly incensed, ‘one would think your private amusement was the one and only point to be considered upon our’—she always spoke in the plural thus—‘taking a living. I suppose the mere detail of the kind of work and the good to be done to our fellow-creatures by Pete and me is of no consequence.’

‘Don’t excite yourself unduly, my dear Basil,’ replied the irrepressible Nell, helping herself to salt in such quantities as at any other time would have called for a protest from her

sister. 'I am, as you have truly observed, looking at the matter from my own point of view, and from that point of view the outlook is gloomy—extra gloomy in comparison with what might have been. As for taking a highly moral view of the matter—*cui bono*? If Peter Paul did not take this living some one else would, who might or might not do as well, probably better; *now*, that man will probably take the university parish, where he may or may not do as well as the Reverend Peter Paul; probably not, seeing that the aforesaid Peter Paul is not only an Old Blue, having rowed in the boat, which carries weight with undergraduates, but is an Honours man, which also carries weight. It is not likely that the other man will possess all these desirable qualifications; but, as you say, that is a matter which you have decided otherwise. Ergo, my interest in the affair has—ceased.'

'There's a great deal in what you say,' remarked Basil, quite mollified, as her younger sister had intended she should be, that astute young woman being quite aware that she had gone far enough, and had better propitiate her sister and brother-in-law.

'Thanks for your good opinion of me, Nell,' said Mr Paul, looking pleased. 'But the fact is my talent—such as it is—does not lie with young men. I don't get on with them, and I should never influence them; moreover, I am no preacher, and that is a greater drawback in a town than it is in a country village, you see.'

'Well, I can't say that I do see,' objected Nell.

'In a country village,' explained Mr Paul humbly, 'where there is only one church, the people must come to hear you, whether they care for you or not, because they have nowhere else to go; whereas in a town, where they have a choice of

churches, they would never come to hear you—or rather me ; at any rate not at Camford, noted for its eloquent preachers.’

‘Peter Paul,’ said his sister-in-law, going round to pat his head, ‘you are that *rara avis*, a humble man.’

And in this mutual satisfaction and good understanding the luncheon-party broke up ; Basil and Nell to go and have a good talk and make arrangements for the hasty journey on the morrow, and the future vicar of Barton to go to his study in all probability to pray for guidance in the great step he purposed taking.

Nell was secretly much amused at a certain air of dignity and gravity which Basil assumed on this occasion, and which, being quite new to her, like a mantle which is not fastened, kept dropping from her as an irresistible impulse to make fun got the upper hand of the younger sister.

CHAPTER III.

BARTON.



TWO months have passed; and a damp, chilly evening in January saw the Reverend Peter Paul, his wife, and his sister-in-law in a second-class compartment of a train on the Great Western, being rattled along on their way to Barton Vicarage.

Mrs Paul was in one corner propped up with cushions and enveloped in wraps; opposite her, and regarding her anxiously every now and then, sat her husband. At the other side of the carriage, her feet, despite the protests of her worthy brother-in-law, up on the cushions of the opposite seat, lolled Nell Lestrangle. Silence reigned supreme. Either the party of three were tired of each other's company or of the journey. The train seemed to be slowing down; and Mrs Paul, rousing herself slightly, broke the silence by saying, 'Are we nearly there, Peter?'

'I am afraid not, dear,' replied her husband. 'We have about two hours' journey more. It is now only five o'clock, and we are not due at Barton until six-forty.'

Mrs Paul lay back on her cushions, looking very white, but said nothing.

'How about a cup of tea?' demanded Nell cheerfully.

Mr Paul looked at her reproachfully, and said, 'I don't see the good of suggesting impossibilities. It was very stupid of

me not to have got tea at Paddington ; but, seeing that I did forget it, and that it is just what Basil wants to rouse her up, I think you need not have mentioned the subject.'

Nell made no reply, but drew from under the seat a travelling-bag, out of which she slowly took, with much flourishing of the different articles, a small kettle and spirit-lamp, which she placed on the floor of the carriage. Having filled the kettle with water from a bottle which she likewise produced from her bag, she proceeded to light the spirit-lamp.

The other two watched her in fascinated absorption.

'Fancy your thinking of that !' ejaculated Mrs Paul, with more animation than she had yet shown. 'Have you tea and cups and milk and sugar ?'

'I have,' replied Nell, and she turned to get them out of the magic bag ; but, alas ! the train gave a lurch, and over went kettle and lamp and all. The water ran in little streams under the seats, meandering at will amongst the impedimenta there deposited, while the spirit ran straight towards Mr Paul, who instinctively gathered his feet up on to the seat under him.

'Put it out !' shrieked Mrs Paul.

'Stamp upon it, Peter, you coward !' cried Nell, who was picking up the lamp and kettle. 'Make haste !'

'Stamp upon it, indeed !' repeated Mr Paul—as he tried vainly in his cramped position to bend down and extinguish the flame with his newspaper, which immediately ignited and had to be hastily thrown out of the window—'with my new thirty shilling boots.' And he looked wildly round for some valueless article to sacrifice to the flames.

Whereupon Nell, who was shaking with laughter, made a dash at her mackintosh, threw it on the fast-dying flames, and stamped them out.

‘Upon my word, Nell,’ said her sister, ‘you are never out of some mischief. Really, one never knows what you are going to do next.’

‘Talk about ingratitude ! That takes the bun,’ cried Nell, who in moments of excitement or moods of recklessness was apt to lapse into slang. ‘Here have I exerted myself to get tea for you just because I knew you had a thoughtless and inconsiderate husband, who would not think of getting it for you, and that is my reward.’

But Basil’s sense of humour, keen as it was, never enabled her to take a joke at her husband’s expense. Moreover, Mr Paul, who had been groping about under the seat, brought out a damp handbox containing his wife’s best bonnet, which she was now examining, and saw had received a little damping from the water, so she replied rather irritably, ‘A thoughtfulness which results in drenching one’s best bonnet, and setting one on fire, does not commend itself to me ; and I’ll thank you not to call my husband a coward.’

Basil was tired after a fortnight’s ‘racket’ in London buying furniture and doing shopping of various sorts, and she was not well. She was consequently excused by both her hearers ; but Mr Paul hastened to say : ‘I must confess it was cowardly of me to get out of the way ; but my new boots rather weigh upon my conscience, and I did not want to spoil them. Besides, one may be permitted to lose one’s head for a moment when one suddenly sees a long tongue of fire running straight at one’s legs.’

‘Never mind,’ said Nell, easily appeased, ‘all’s well that ends well.’ Then, holding up the bottle to the light, ‘Thank Heaven ! I have enough water to refill the kettle.’ And here she began her preparations all over again.

‘I won’t have it done,’ said Mrs Paul with decision. ‘Goodness knows what damage you will do this time. I wonder the guard did not come when that burning paper was thrown out of the window. Besides, all desire for a cup of tea is effectually quenched.’

‘All right,’ said Nell imperturbably, ‘all the more for me and Peter, if he will condescend to partake. As for not having it done: this is a free country, and this “yere kirridge” is not, so far as I am aware, your private property; ergo, I shall make myself a cup of tea, that’s flat.’

Mr Paul came to the rescue.

‘It will be all right if I hold on to the spirit-stand,’ he said; and he good-naturedly sat on the floor and kept watch while Nell arranged the tea-things in a corner, which she barricaded round with rugs to make safe.

‘I’ll tell you what is not all right,’ remarked Mrs Paul severely, ‘and that is your slang, Nell. When you are not on your guard your expressions are most unladylike, and you turn everything and everybody into ridicule. It is really time you put some restraint upon yourself or you will scandalise the people down here.’

‘Ha!’ said Nell, who did not appreciate her sister’s new attitude of propriety, ‘isn’t that kettle a bilin’ yet, Peter?’

‘Yes,’ replied Mr Paul, as he carefully extinguished the spirit-lamp, made the tea, and, getting up from his cramped position, handed his wife a cup. ‘I must say,’ he added as he stretched his long legs, ‘I call this making tea under difficulties. There are points about tea in a drawing-room which one never appreciated before.—But we are both very much obliged to you for the kind thought, Nell.—Really, I shall be quite thankful when we are settled at Barton. We have lived in a whirl for the last two months, and this fortnight

has been the last straw. You will feel better when this move is over, Basil,' he added kindly.

'Yes; but it isn't over yet,' she said in a depressed tone. 'That's the worst of it. I perfectly dread the arranging and putting in order of that big house—big at least compared with the little "curatage"—and making friends with all these new people who won't think me at all a proper parson's wife.'

'Won't they?' exclaimed her husband, in a tone which made Nell say hastily, 'Remember, I'm here, please; and it's very bad form to make a third person feel out of it. And as for arranging the house, you shall lie on a sofa and direct Peter and me, and we will set it all straight in a trice; and by the time that is done, and you see your new house looking so lovely, you will feel quite revived and ready to face the most stiff and starched parishioner that ever called to criticise a vicar's wife.'

Mrs Paul smiled languidly, but observed that Nell's latest escapade was not calculated to inspire confidence in her power of arranging domestic matters; and then, soothed by the tea, she leant back and went off to sleep, and the other two retired to their respective corners and dreamt dreams.

Nought happens but the unexpected. It was well for the two dreamers that the future with its dread secrets was hidden from them, and that they sped on their way to the scene of their new labours with their spirits unoppressed by any warning of storms to come.

More than an hour had passed, and the train had again slackened speed.

Mrs Paul opened her eyes. 'Surely we must be near Barton now, Peter?'

Mr Paul roused himself in turn; and, peering out of the steam-bedewed window, on which he cleared a spot, as is the

wont of travellers, with the leather window-strap, said, 'Yes, I think we are.'

'What's the good of your inciting your husband to mendacity, Basil,' Nell broke in, 'considering that it is pitch dark, so that Peter can't see an inch out of the aperture, far less distinguish the landmarks, the which distinguishing configuration of the landscape would not assist him if they were visible, owing to his ignorance of the benighted locality in which, for our transgressions, we now find ourselves, so that any information he may impart will be simply—fiction?'

'Excuse me,' said Mr Paul, quietly turning towards Nell from his occupation of piercing the darkness, 'if rash statements are mendacious, you have brought that charge upon yourself, because in the first place I can see some landmarks; and, in the second place, I have just recognised Drayling Church tower, which is only a few miles from Barton. So you had better be getting our wraps together.'

'I wish you would not speak in that affected, long-winded manner, Nell,' said Mrs Paul. 'If you talk like that to the people here they won't understand a word you say, and will simply put you down as a conceited idiot. If that's the result of those philosophical and other learned books which, for some unknown reason, you have lately taken to poring over, the sooner you give up their perusal the better.'

The dim light of the carriage-lamp hid a very vivid blush on Nell's face as she answered, 'There's no pleasing some people. Did you or did you not request me to drop slang, and try not to be frivolous, so as not to shock the good folk here?'

'There's a medium between talking slang and turning everything into ridicule; and your latest Johnsonian style'—— returned her sister.

But now the train gave a jerk, and the engine a shrill whistle as they swung round a sharp curve, and almost immediately came to a standstill.

‘Here we are!’ cried Mr Paul, as he gave his wife his hand to help her to rise, and Nell was struck by a note of enthusiasm and suppressed emotion in his voice. ‘Home at last, dear wife!’

‘No, not home yet,’ said Basil, and again the tone struck Nell, but this time with a chill.

As the door of the carriage was thrown open, a peal of bells rang forth, and Mr Paul, pressing his wife’s hand, said, ‘Our welcome, Basil! A good omen, my dear.’

‘How odd,’ cried Nell, ‘that the bells should strike up just as you arrived. It looks as if they knew you were coming, and had had your approach signalled with a merry peal.’

‘More appropriate if they tolled the bells,’ was Mrs Paul’s contradictory comment as she slowly and wearily alighted, and took her husband’s arm to walk along the dimly lighted platform.

‘The vicar and Mrs Paul, I believe, sir,’ said a fine-looking man in uniform, who proved to be the stationmaster, addressing Mr Paul. ‘Welcome to Barton, sir!’

Mr Paul held out his hand to the speaker. ‘Thank you. This is our second welcome; the bells were our first.’

‘Yes, sir, they came in just right; they went by the whistle, you see.’

‘They were for us then?’ inquired Mr Paul. ‘I thought they were in honour of some local festivity.’

‘Oh no, sir; they were for you and your good lady right enough. But I doubt she’s not very strong,’ as he looked at Mrs Paul.

The latter, who had likewise shaken hands, here gave the

stationmaster one of her brilliant smiles, and said, 'You wait and see! Perhaps you will be wishing soon that I were not so strong and energetic; and I have my sister with me, Miss Lestrangle, who is just as energetic as I am, and who is going to help me.'

Nell, thus brought into the conversation, as in duty bound, shook hands politely, but without much enthusiasm and in silence. Inwardly she was vowing vengeance upon her sister for making any such promises in her name.

'What a number of people seem to have come by this train,' said Mr Paul to his wife as they walked along the platform, which for a small country station seemed to be very full.

Nell smiled grimly. She guessed what was indeed the truth: that the present animated appearance was not that usual to Barton Station at that hour, but was occasioned by a desire to see the new vicar and his family.

The Vicarage being at present uninhabitable, Mr and Mrs Paul and Nell had taken lodgings in the Old Vicarage House, a picturesque, old-fashioned place which had been a school, and was still occupied by Mrs Seaman, the former school-mistress, now blind.

The Old Vicarage House, which, as its name implies, had at one time been the Vicarage, looked on to the church, in fact its walls formed part of the churchyard boundary; and as the trio entered the house the bells gave a clash.

'Gracious!' cried Nell, starting nervously, 'I hope they'll soon stop that row. Enough's as good as a feast, and bells at any time make me melancholy.'

'That is a condition to which I never yet saw you reduced,' said her brother-in-law, who was very much pleased with his reception by his new parishioners; 'and it would be rather

contrary of you to be taken that way by these friendly chimes.'

'Peter is waxing poetical,' observed Nell. 'I consider it's time we had supper. Musical welcomes may be satisfying to his ethereal mood; but we poor weak mortals are famishing.' And with much dissatisfaction, Nell looked round the huge barn of a room into which they had been ushered.

As she said this the patter of feet across the square tessellated hall was heard, the door opened, and a cheery little voice was heard saying, 'Good-evening, Mr and Mrs Paul. Welcome to Barton. I am pleased to see you.'

The party turned and saw a dainty little old lady, with large black spectacles, and pretty, refined old face advancing towards them, and holding out her hand. A few paces off she stopped and said, 'I am afraid I must ask you to come and shake hands with me here, for if I come any farther I may knock against you. I am blind.'

Mrs Paul, impulsive as ever, sprang forward, and, taking the old lady's hand in both hers, said, 'We are so glad to know you, Mrs Seaman; and if you can find your way about like that, eyes don't much matter, I think. Thank you for taking us in so kindly.'

Basil was tired, and feeling very far from well; but there was no trace of fatigue in her voice as she led and introduced the old lady to her husband and Nell, and tried to put her in the most comfortable armchair in the room.

'Oh, but I did not come to sit down,' cried old Mrs Seaman. 'I came to say that I had taken the liberty of having your supper laid in my own little sitting-room, as I thought it would be warmer and cosier for you after your cold journey; but I can easily have it brought in here, only this room is so

large it is difficult to warm it properly on a chilly evening like this.'

As the room in question was about thirty feet long, and broad in proportion, this was not surprising; and, as may be imagined, the party adjourned with alacrity to Mrs Seaman's sitting-room, 'little' only by comparison.

Before supper Mr Paul whispered something to his wife, and, on her nodding her head, disappeared.

'He has gone to thank the bell-ringers,' she explained, 'and does not wish us to wait; and, really, I am so hungry, I do not think we will.'


'I should hope not,' said Nell plainly. And the sisters fell to, while old Mrs Seaman sat in her armchair by the fire and talked. 'You need not mind me,' she said, 'for I can't watch you eat; and if you want to talk secrets you can talk low, and I shall not hear a word, for I am getting deaf.'

Yet she was the most cheerful as well as one of the most amiable of persons in Barton, as the Pauls soon discovered.

It was as well that they had not waited for Mr Paul, for the new vicar of Barton did not reappear for more than two hours, by which time his wife and sister-in-law had retired to their rooms, if not to sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

EARLY CALLERS.

HY, oh why, I ask you, has that thick-headed foreman seen fit to spread all our worst and shabbiest furniture in battle array over the drive in full view of any visitor who may chance to call?' inquired Mrs Paul plaintively, as she stood at the study window facing the long, straight drive which led to Barton Vicarage, and regarded with dissatisfaction the motley assemblage of household goods there displayed.

Nell, who was standing beside her, laughed and looked over her shoulder at the bestrewn drive. 'What on earth did you bring such things for? There is actually a chair with a broken back and one with the seat out.'

'Never!' exclaimed Mrs Paul, peering anxiously out. But her eye falling on the offending objects, she added, 'Then they have been broken on the way. I never brought broken chairs; and, oh dear! how dusty and dirty everything looks; and I'm sure'—plaintively—'the "curatage" was always noted for being so spick-and-span. Now, wasn't it?'

'My dear child!' remarked Nell, 'that's a well-known peculiarity of furniture. In a house it looks all right; but meet that same furniture on a van, and you lose all respect for its owners. Don't you remember Ada Robinson and the

awful mistake I made, which nearly cost us the friendship of the family ?'

'I don't know that tale, Nell. Do tell me,' said Mr Paul from the back of the room, where he was sorting books.

'Well, you must know that the aforesaid Robinsons are not quite gentlefolk ; but have no end of money, and a very grand "establishment," which on one occasion they were moving from one part of the West End to another. On an afternoon when Ada was calling upon us a van passed the window. I, not finding Ada's conversation particularly interesting, was looking out of the window, and for something to say remarked, "What a shabby collection of furniture to pass through this Square ; it looks more suitable to White-chapel." Ada looked up too, and said, "We are moving to-day ;" and, crossing to the window, exclaimed with horror, "Why, those are some of the men who are moving us ! That must be our furniture !"

'Mother apologised and I explained, but in vain. Ada could not get over it ; she said she did not know they had such dreadful-looking things in their house. She should order them to be thrown away at once. She also assured us, almost with tears in her eyes, that one table alone in their drawing-room—I knew it, a hideous inlaid thing—cost a hundred pounds, and their pictures were worth thousands, and so on.'

'Let that console you, Basil,' said Mr Paul to his wife, who was still contemplating the array on the drive.

'I sincerely hope no visitor will call while these disreputable things are spread over our drive. Nothing could explain away those two chairs. And, oh, Peter ! couldn't you go and fetch in those pots and pans. The men must have been cooking in them. Mary would never have packed them in that dirty condition.'

‘My dear,’ said Mr Paul, ‘I really don’t think it matters. No one is in the least likely to call; and if they did the state of the drive would soon show them their mistake. Now, my study does matter. I am expecting some parishioners this afternoon, and have nothing but books for them to sit on, which, besides being uncomfortable, would be very bad for my books. If you and Nell would come and help me with these books there would be some chance of our getting this room at least straight—that is to say,’ he added severely, ‘if Nell would get up off my *Biblical Encyclopædia*, and abstain from trying to read every single book she takes up to dust or pretend to dust.’

Thus admonished, Nell got up and set to work to bang books with a will, generally, as her sister remarked, with more vigour the nearer she was to either Peter or herself, whom she recklessly smothered with dust.

Suddenly Mr Paul exclaimed, ‘Listen! a carriage.’

‘The butcher,’ said Nell, who was once again engrossed in a book, without looking up.

‘Then the butcher calls in a carriage and pair.—Oh, Peter! what are we to do? I won’t see them? Do you think the coachman will be idiot enough to drive up to the door?’

‘Scarcely over all those chairs and tin paraphernalia,’ replied her husband dryly. ‘I trust they will turn back.’

‘They would if they had any right feeling,’ observed Nell.

But this apparently was just what they did not possess, for, after some conversation with the coachman, the footman descended from his perch, picked his way, with well-bred passivity through the pots and pans, and rang the bell.

‘Say I’m out, dead, asleep, anything,’ said Mrs Paul wildly to her husband, who was acting page-boy and general servant.

‘I cannot possibly tell any such palpable falsehood,’ replied he, ‘if I wanted to, seeing that you deliberately looked out of the window just this minute.’

‘Well, I won’t see them,’ were his wife’s parting words as he disappeared out of the room.

After a short parley at the door, Mrs Paul saw her husband follow the footman to the carriage and shake hands with the occupants, whom he conducted through the débris on the drive to the door.

‘The idiot!’ cried Nell, who was presumably off her guard. ‘What evil spirit possessed him to bring them in when he could quite well have put them off?’

‘The spirit of truth and courtesy,’ said Mrs Paul loftily, ‘which you do not seem able to appreciate.’

‘Nor you either, my dear sister,’ commented Nell under her breath; but aloud she only remarked, ‘I only hope those two good ladies will appreciate it. By their looks I have my doubts as to whether a rickety seat on dusty books will “suit the works,” as the mad hatter said. May I mention that your face is distinctly dirty, and that you have a large smut over your left eye? Any way, the visitors will not be struck by your complexion, which is supposed to be your chief beauty.’

Mrs Paul’s countenance fell as she gave her face a hasty scrub with a somewhat dirty handkerchief, muttering, ‘Goodness me! How very annoying, and what an object you look, Nell.’

‘That,’ said Nell, ‘is a matter of no present importance,’ and, having ascertained by the sound of steps in the hall that the front drive was clear, she threw open the study window, vaulted lightly out, and disappeared from view.

‘I think you will find the hall the cleanest and clearest place, Lady Dumont,’ Mrs Paul heard her husband say. ‘Allow me to dust you a chair.’

Mrs Paul groaned, ascertained by the aid of a pocket looking-glass that her face if not clean was at least guiltless of smuts, and went out to do her duty as hostess to her unwelcome visitors.

‘I am so very sorry, Mrs Paul,’ said Lady Dumont. ‘I had no idea you had so lately arrived ; we live so far off, and it is so difficult to get a fine day to pay calls at this time of year that I did not feel as if I could turn back without coming in to see you.’

‘I am only so sorry for your sake that your first visit should be so uncomfortable, and your first impressions so unfavourable ; but I am very glad to see you, and I think it very kind of you to take us as we are.’

In her heart Basil felt that there was no excuse but sheer selfishness for her being thus invaded ; but the exigencies of modern life do not admit of the utterance on such occasions of one’s real sentiments. So the three ladies, the third being Lady Dumont’s daughter, sat and smiled and uttered polite nothings, while the Reverend Peter Paul, the only one of the four who was at his ease, talked of the country, and Barton Church, which was a very beautiful one ; and seemed quite sorry when after a few minutes the visitors got up to go.

When they arrived at the front door what was the surprise, not to say relief, of the party to find the drive quite clear, not a ‘stick of furniture,’ as the poor people say, to be seen.

Mrs Paul felt her self-respect returning, and her spirits rising as her unwelcome guests disappeared.

‘Who are they, Peter?’ she asked, as the carriage rolled away from the drive.

‘Yes, who are they?’ demanded Nell, who now re-appeared, the coast being clear.

‘Oh, there *you* are!’ was Mrs Paul’s greeting, with rather an injured air. ‘I hope the coachman did not see you jumping out of the study window in that hoydenish way. What did you run away for? So rudely’——

‘Rudely?’ said Nell. ‘What’s rude in stepping out of a window? Those people did not come to see me—did not even know of my existence. Besides, I was better employed than in telling polite lies, as I’ll be bound you were. Behold the transformation scene!’

‘That certainly is a blessing,’ said Mr Paul, ignoring Nell’s insinuation. ‘But you must get to know those Dumonts; they live at Westmacott, and have the largest house in the neighbourhood—an old Elizabethan house, the late vicar told me, with a banqueting-hall or ballroom one hundred feet long.’

‘Oh!’ said Nell with interest. ‘Any young men?’

‘Yes, one or two—one is a would-be Member of Parliament—so they entertain largely.’

‘I’m game. Basil, I will return the call with you the moment my new gown comes down from town.’

‘I don’t know that I shall take you,’ replied Mrs Paul, with an elder sister’s privilege of speaking home-truths. ‘You keep me in a perpetual ferment. I never know what you are going to say next.’

‘I can tell you what I am going to say next,’ said Nell, ‘and that is that I have struck work, and am off to have some lunch at the Old Vicarage House. It’s past three o’clock, and not a blessed mo’sel has passed my lips since ten

o'clock breakfast. If you' and Peter can live on love and air, you may ; I can't, for I 'm ravenous after slaving here for hours.'

'But my study?' said Mr Paul, looking round in despair. 'I really think it is in a worse condition than it was when we began this morning.'

'Ugh, you selfish wretch!' cried Nell, 'if you have no heart to feel for my hunger, you might at least for fear of manslaughter have compassion on me,' and with that Nell clapped her brother-in-law's soft clerical hat on her head and marched off down the drive.

'Nell, Nell, you've got my hat on!' shouted Mr Paul after her.

'All right! Stick on mine, it'll suit you fine. You'll find it on the study table,' shouted Nell back without turning her head.

'What a girl!' murmured Mrs Paul, looking after her.

'Do you think she is really going down the village street with my hat on?' inquired Mr Paul as he stood gazing after the fast-retreating figure of his sister-in-law.

'I don't think about it,' returned his wife, 'I am quite sure she is. Upon my word, I shall be glad in some ways when she is gone. As far as work goes, if this morning is a specimen, she is no use at all, and there is no end to her madcap tricks. The next thing is to find her hat.'

'You don't suggest my going home in that, I should hope,' Mr Paul cried in horror.

Mrs Paul took a fit of laughter. 'Oh, Peter, you will kill me one of these days! Do I take you and Nell for costers, whose idea of humour is hat-exchanging?'

'Coster or no coster, that appears to be Nell's idea of humour. It certainly is not mine, nor is the prospect of

going home hatless and catching my death of cold, thanks to her vagaries.'

Meanwhile Mrs Paul had been searching about. 'Here's Nell's hat, and it's a sailor; it seems very large too, so I really think you might wear it for that short distance.'

Mr Paul looked at the offending hat askance, then, taking it up and examining it, he exclaimed, 'Why, it *is* mine. Talk about cool cheek! She must have worn it coming up.'

'She's unbearable,' said his wife sympathetically. 'Let us go home before she eats the entire luncheon. She is capable of that or of any other enormity in her present mood.'

It was true. Nell was in a most unaccountable humour. Her fun seemed to have taken a twist. True, she kept up her sister's spirits, no easy task in her present semi-invalid condition; and, except when her love of books proved too great a temptation, she did a fair amount of work, and made herself very useful. But there was a restlessness noticeable about her, which as often as not found vent in mad freaks and escapades which kept her married sister and her husband in a constant state of nervousness. It was not that either of them objected to fun. Both Mr Paul and his wife could enjoy a joke as well as any one; but, as they separately and collectively pointed out to Nell not once or twice, but continually, the present was not the time for practical jokes. They were all, so to speak, on approbation. Every soul in the overgrown village was agog to hear the latest about the new Vicarage people, and every little insignificant scrap of information was eagerly devoured.

Nell's sole comment was that this being the case, it would be a kindness to the poor things to give them something to talk about, seeing that they were so hard up for topics of conversation. Acting upon this charitable resolution, Nell

did indeed furnish the 'natives' with endless subject for discussion. Whether she would have been edified by the varied comments her equally varied actions evoked is doubtful. Probably she would have laughed; in fact, this is what she did do when Miss Nesbit, Mrs Seaman's former assistant-teacher and present companion, on one or two occasions brought in the latest tale about 'Miss Nell' in the village. But in spite of the apparently hearty laughter, Nell did not enjoy hearing that the young bumpkins at the stone-quarries had been heard to say that the new vicar's sister was up to any lark, and they would not any of them mind having her for their 'girl.' As for Mrs Paul, her wrath was great, and it was probably some remembrance of this or some similar episode that called forth her remark anent the advisability of Nell's early departure. At all events, she said something of the kind to Nell, and that high-spirited young woman took offence, and betook her baggage and her bright, cheery presence off just at a time when she was really needed by her sister.

No sooner was she gone than Mrs Paul found out how terribly she missed her, and began forthwith to droop. In the hundred-and-one petty vexations and difficulties of her new, and, if the truth be known, uncongenial position, Nell had been the greatest comfort, her unrestrained merriment over the criticisms of the parishioners, and her versatility of mind which enabled her to suggest a way out of some small bother, were a great help. Now she was gone, and the molehills became mountains which Mrs Paul despaired of climbing.

In her new character of sober vicaress, which sat so uncomfortably upon her, Mrs Paul was afraid to laugh over much that was not worthy of grave consideration; and Mr Paul,

who was only glad that she took her responsibilities so soberly, did not realise how cruelly she was crushing down her lively nature.

Mr Paul, loving husband and affectionate man as he was by nature, was so absorbed in his new work, into which he had thrown himself with all the energy and enthusiasm of a restless disposition, that he did not notice or rather did not take sufficient notice of his wife's health; and in after days Nell bitterly blamed both herself and him for their conduct at this time.

But Mrs Paul's mother, who was one of those quiet, observant women, possessing a wonderful power of judgment, said, 'You must not blame yourself or Peter. There is no one to blame unless it be dear Basil herself, for she would do too much, and she never was a person who could be controlled.'

CHAPTER V.

VILLAGE GOSSIP.



R and Mrs Paul arrived at the Old Vicarage House to find Nell comfortably seated at lunch, and engaged in an apparently deeply interesting conversation with Miss Nesbit, Mrs Seaman's companion.

Now, Miss Nesbit, though one of the most good-natured of women, was an inveterate gossip; and Mr Paul had all a man's objection to such a means of becoming acquainted with his new parishioners and their idiosyncrasies. Not so Miss Lestrangle. She took a very human interest in her neighbours, high and low; an interest shared, indeed, by her sister, who was privately much tempted to avail herself of Miss Nesbit's abundant information on the subject. But when Mr Paul could prevent it he did so.

On this occasion, however, fate proved too strong for Mr Paul. Nell greeted them with, 'My poor dears—would you believe it?—there are four different and diverse places of worship in this unhappy village: your own and three other schism shops; and, only fancy! one is in your own sacred Vicarage grounds.'

'One place of worship in the Vicarage grounds?' echoed Mr Paul, incredulous.

'Yes, indeed,' said Miss Nesbit. 'It does sound odd to you, no doubt; but it is quite true. You may have noticed

that tumbledown-looking gray stone building at the back of your kitchen-garden. They call themselves Baptists, I think, or Anabaptists, or something of that sort anyway,' with delightful vagueness.

Mr Paul laughed quietly.

But Mrs Paul exclaimed in her impulsive way, 'A dissenting chapel in our grounds? You surely won't allow that, will you, Peter? I never heard of such a thing.'

'It does seem rather an anomaly,' admitted Mr Paul. 'I wonder how it arose. Do you know?' he inquired of Miss Nesbit.

But Miss Nesbit could not say. All she knew was that the sect—a very insignificant one in point of numbers—had been in existence and had worshipped in the mean-looking structure spoken of ever since she came to Barton, and that was forty years ago, when she was a girl. The leader or preacher, she explained, was the son of a former vicar of Newton, three miles off, and he had a meeting-house in his father's own parish for some years.

'How horrid of him!' cried Mrs Paul. 'I don't call that a Christian way of behaving at all. I'm sure you ought not to encourage him.'

'I wonder,' remarked Nell gravely, as if anxious for information, 'what a Christian way of behaving is. Here's a man who evidently has the courage of his opinions; and, having concluded that his father's teaching was heretical, sets to work, doubtless at some personal inconvenience, to counteract it and teach what he presumes to be the truth, and he is dubbed a horrid and unchristian man.'

Mrs Paul was slightly taken aback. Her shrewd young sister hid a good deal of general information and some thought under her nonsensical exterior; but it was so effectually

hidden that her friends and relatives may be excused for ignoring its existence.

All this time Mr Paul had said nothing ; but now he struck in with some question about the leader of the strict Baptists, as they afterwards proved to be.

‘To look at, Mr Houghton is a most amiable old man, with white hair and a flowing white beard. I’m sure he *looks* most harmless, and as if he could not hurt a fly.’

When Mr Paul had made inquiries about the matter he came home to his wife and told her that he could not legally turn Mr Houghton out ; and that, having seen him, he had no desire to do so. ‘The man may be a fanatic ; but he is, as Miss Nesbit said he looked, quite harmless. I had a most amicable talk with him, in which we agreed to differ.’

Mrs Paul looked at her husband with admiration. His amiability and peace-loving nature was a standing rebuke to her with her quick, impulsive temper.

But meanwhile Nell was tired of this subject, and cried, ‘Talking of harmless people’—there was really no connection—‘who is that very nice-looking young man—tall, well set-up, brown hair and brown eyes, and a very pleasant expression—who goes into that little cottage next door?’

Miss Nesbit looked up with animation. ‘Ah ! that,’ she said, ‘is young Will.’

‘Young Will ?’ questioned Nell.

‘Yes, young Will Neville,’ replied Miss Nesbit.

At this point a quick vivid blush suffused Nell’s face.

Even Mr Paul noticed it ; and, before his wife could prevent him, asked Nell, ‘Why, do you know this young man ?’

‘Certainly not,’ replied Nell promptly.

But Miss Nesbit, who was very short-sighted, did not notice anything, and rambled on about her favourite. ‘He is

called young Will to distinguish him from his uncle, old Will (Dr William Neville), with whom he lives in that ivy-covered house facing the Vicarage gates. Old Will was an army doctor, and without exception the closest old man alive. Well there, the tales of that old man's meanness are'——

But here Mrs Paul interrupted her. 'Allowing his nephew to stay with him does not sound mean, and I see his name on several subscription lists. It is a good name.' It was also the name of a friend—Mrs Paul suspected a more than friend—of Nell's. 'Has he a father?'

Miss Nesbit looked mysterious and slightly embarrassed. 'Well, since you ask me, he has; and perhaps it's as well you should hear the story from me, for you could not be long in Barton without hearing it from some one, that's certain. Mr Neville, Will's father, was one of the best lawyers about here. He lived in the biggest house in the village, in grand style, and every one trusted him with their money. I did, for one, only it was but a hundred or two I had. We all thought him as safe—safer—than the Bank of England, living in such state as he did, and his wife such a handsome, fashionable woman, and proud. Then, one fine day, about four years ago, Mr James Neville disappeared, and with him all our money—two hundred thousand pounds, Mrs Paul—every penny gone, not a pound left, and every one in the place the poorer for it.'

'How shocking!' said Mrs Paul. 'I wonder his son likes to stay on.'

'Well, that's just what every one says, and some people won't speak to him even now. Mrs Bicknell, down the street, now, she lost two hundred pounds a year, every penny she possessed, and has to turn to at her age, over sixty, and give music lessons to earn a little. But Will says he has lost his money and is as great a sufferer as any one else; and as for

going elsewhere, the story would be sure to follow him. No lawyer would trust him or employ him, and he means to live it down.'

'Well done him!' said Mrs Paul. 'I shall make a point of being friendly with that poor fellow—sha'n't we, Peter?'

'Certainly,' replied her husband. 'I hope to be friends with all my parishioners.'

'Me too,' remarked Nell. 'Fetch him in this afternoon, Miss Nesbit.'

Mrs Paul looked dubious; but knew better than to appear to throw cold water on this suggestion. Neither she nor Mr Paul were enjoying altogether their lunch, thanks to Nell. As for that young person, she was quite aware of the annoyance she was causing; but a spirit of mischief possessed her. Miss Nesbit having taken her departure, Mrs Paul's feelings found vent.

'Really, Nell, you must not gossip with Miss Nesbit like that, and you must be more careful what you say. Fancy asking her to bring that young man in this afternoon! It is very forward of you.'

'Avaunt, cat!' was Nell's irrelevant answer to her sister's remark, as with a wave of her hand she turned to her brother-in-law, and said: 'There are four retired majors and their families in this place, not to mention one retired army doctor and a naval ditto. So I wish you joy of your new abode.'

'Why?' inquired Mr Paul innocently.

'Why?' exclaimed Nell. 'Because, my dear brother, it means gossip, gossip, gossip, alternated with slander, slander, slander; and if you'll take my advice, which of course you won't, you'll just listen to all the gossip, and put the slander right, otherwise it will circulate and circulate, leaving you out until no one has a reputation left, not even yourselves.'

Whereas, if you listen to it, you may save some one's character once and again.'

'I did not expect these words of wisdom from you, Nell,' was her brother-in-law's comment.

'That is where you do me injustice,' said the oracle.

'Unless I do you injustice too,' interposed her sister, 'you are about as great a gossip as one could find even in a country village.—By the way, Peter, I wonder who lives in that long, rambling house opposite the village cross?' she continued.

'Ahem!' said Nell. 'I'm sorry not to be able to answer that question; but not wishing to foster your love of gossip'——

'Don't be aggravating! Who is it?' asked Mrs Paul.

After some teasing, Nell replied, 'That is the Old Manor House, where lives another lawyer. His wife is clever and very eccentric, and does not get on with any one—except her laundress, who swears by her—at any rate she is not on calling terms with any one; though, by the way, none of the majors' wives are on those terms with each other. But this lawyer's wife is worse; in fact, she is not sure whether she will call on you or not. However, the laundress has been making inquiries about you on her behalf, and Miss Nesbit has given a glowing description of you to the aforesaid laundress, who promises to do her best for you.'

But here there was a diversion, for Mr Paul suddenly pushed back his chair and left the room. He had had enough gossip, and could stand no more of it.

'There, you have driven Peter away with your tongue,' said his wife reproachfully.

'Just what I desired,' remarked Nell. 'He was getting on my nerves, sitting there with his eyebrows hunched up into his hair.'

‘For shame, Nell!’ cried Mrs Paul. ‘You have positively no reverence in you. But, oh dear! these people and their petty quarrels and spites! I have not seen one I could make a friend of, but I *will* make friends of them.’

‘Of course you will, staunch friends; and as for their quarrels, you will set a new tone and stop that. Make them all meet at your house unknown to each other. They can’t quarrel there; and once the ice is broken they will “speak” again.’

Mrs Paul sighed. ‘If I were not so young and did not feel so old! Clergymen’s wives ought all to be about forty, and keep at that.’

‘Fair, fat, and forty?’ queried Nell. ‘Not fair though. It’s quite a mistake for a parson’s wife to be fair; it only makes people suspect her of worldliness and frivolity. I suppose that’s why the wives of the clergy are generally so plain. I shall never marry a parson. I’d rather wed a sweep!’

‘Or a barrister?’ Mrs Paul could not resist the temptation to make this allusion to Nell’s latest admirer.

But Nell was not to be caught off her guard again, and replied calmly, ‘Yes, or a barrister.’

As they sat thus over the fire talking, Mrs Paul discoursing on her favourite topic—the reforms she was going to bring in the village and in the lives of the people—there came a knock at the door of the sitting-room; and Miss Nesbit, opening it, poking her smooth, good-natured face in, said, ‘May Will come in, Mrs Paul?’

Both ladies roused themselves and hastily assumed less negligent attitudes. Mrs Paul would have felt inclined to resent the unceremoniousness of the intrusion; but the thought of the young man’s history disarmed her.

Young Will, as every one, including in time Mrs Paul and her sister, called him, proved to be a very honest-faced, pleasant-spoken, and intelligent young fellow. He apologised for calling at this juncture; but said in a very manly way, 'I understood from Miss Nesbit that I might, and I thought I should like to thank you for giving me leave.' He became friendly with Nell on the subject of horses, and finally won Mrs Paul's heart by the way he spoke of his little brothers and sisters.

'I hope they will be friendly with my little ones,' she said brightly.

'Oh, they do not live here,' said Mr Neville hastily. 'My mother lives at Cranford with the youngsters; she does not come to Barton.'

In spite of his bright face, a very sad expression came over the young man's face, and no wonder; the surprising thing was the complete absence of bitterness.

Young Will Neville deserved the character Miss Nesbit gave him of being the sweetest-natured man in Barton.

Before he left, Mr Paul arrived upon the scene, and he too was captivated by the young man's modest yet self-respecting manner.

Mrs Paul enlisted his services as the secretary of the lawn-tennis club she meant to get up in the village, and Mr Paul had 'booked him,' as he put it, to work up a lad's evening club, the number of rough-looking boys playing about the village streets having attracted that worthy man's attention.

'Well, how do you like your first call from a parishioner?' asked Mr Paul as he returned from seeing his guest to the door of Mrs Seaman's sitting-room, where he said he was due for tea.

‘Very much,’ replied his wife promptly. ‘I think he is going to be very useful.’

Nell groaned. ‘It’s awful, simply awful! Talk about morality! It is at a deplorably low ebb in the houses of clergymen.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’ asked Mrs Paul rather indignantly. ‘Who is talking about morality, to begin with?’

‘I am,’ observed Nell. ‘I am shocked and horrified by yours and Peter’s. You think of people not as human beings but as parishioners, and only then as being useful or useless. As for a disinterested affection for any one, in my opinion you are absolutely destitute of it.’

‘Your opinion, allow me to remark, was not asked upon the subject. And upon another subject, since you are taking this high moral tone, allow me to observe that I shall be glad if you will maintain it and refrain from amusing yourself with that young man, which I have an inward conviction you mean to do, despite your noble sentiments.’

‘Call me a common flirt, and have done with it,’ cried Nell, her eyes flashing dangerously.

‘That is the last thing I should call you,’ said Mrs Paul; ‘but it is a strange and undeniable fact that you never go into a room but before long you have all the young men round you; and as it is not beauty, which you don’t possess, it must be some occult power you exert.’

‘Sounds like the Lorelei. Perhaps it’s my hair,’ suggested Nell flippantly. ‘I have not noticed the phenomenon myself; but I have heard that red hair has a kind of poisonous effect upon people. I shall try combing mine the next time young Mr Will comes, and see the effect.’

'I trust you will do no such thing,' cried Mr Paul anxiously and hastily. 'Your sister did not mean anything but that you are very bright and attractive to young men, and that perhaps you would do well not to turn the heads of the young men in this country place.'

'I thank thee much for thy good opinion of me,' said Nell mockingly, as she made her brother-in-law a low curtsy.

But the Reverend Peter Paul had not finished, and made what was for him quite a long speech. 'I have a very high opinion of you,' he said; 'so high that I do not think you would willingly play with the affections of any man. I only want to warn you that you have the village youth at a disadvantage. He has only met village girls with provincial manners and narrow provincial ideas; and you, coming down from town, with your town manners and gowns'—Nell gave a comic look at her plain blue serge—'oh! you know what I mean,' said her brother impatiently, 'you know that you can amuse these young men, and I do hope'—

'Prithee cease,' broke in Nell in theatrical tones. 'This siren Lorelei, and general destroyer of man's peace, will as soon as possible take her frivolous and undesirable self to a less virtuous abode; in the meantime she will—amuse herself.' And with that she pirouetted out of the room; and as her voice was soon after heard issuing in peals of laughter from Mrs Seaman's sitting-room, whose tea-table she as well as Mr William Neville, junior, was gracing, her brother-in-law and his wife devoutly wished they had not raised her spirit of mischief.

Nell dated many a trouble from that tea-table; but she would dismiss the thought and say to herself, 'It is Kismet! You cannot fight against fate. The only way to look at it is that we are working on the wrong side of the tapestry.'

CHAPTER VI.

NEW BROOMS.



MR and Mrs Paul were sitting alone in the drawing-room, Miss Eleanor Lestrangle having taken her departure, and, so she declared, bidden eternal adieu to Barton, which she designated a 'hole of the dreariest description,' and to her ungrateful and unappreciative relatives there. Mr Paul, soft-hearted man that he was, felt quite distressed lest Nell should be really hurt, and think them ungrateful; and he was quite depressed at the thought of not having her as a visitor. But his wife reassured him upon that point.

'My dear husband,' she said, 'you do not know the ways of the Lestranges yet, or you would have discovered that they never by any chance mean half that they say. In spite of the threatenings and slaughter that Nell breathed out before her departure, I shall be much surprised if we do not see her down here again before many months are over—and probably not alone,' she wound up significantly.

'All the better. You mean with your mother?' replied Mr Paul, who liked his mother-in-law, as indeed it would have been difficult not to do.

'No, I do *not* mean with my mother—oh, densest of men! I mean with a male man.'

'A male man?' echoed Mr Paul. 'I certainly am dense. Now, could Nell bring down a man unless she were engaged

to him ; and—why, surely, there is nothing of that kind in the wind ?’

Mr Paul seemed quite aggrieved. He was one of those men, and there are many such, who look upon their feminine friends and relatives in quite a brotherly fashion, and resent any other man looking upon them in any other light. Not that he would have admitted this, for he would have been the first to deprecate such selfishness. Still, the fact remained that he looked upon possible admirers for Nell with disfavour. Mrs Paul, secure in his entire devotion, used sometimes laughingly to say that it was a pity he had not married Nell, for he was never so bright as when she was there, and no one could coax him to do what she wanted so well as Nell. When Basil made this remark to her sister the latter’s wrath was unbounded. It is an aggravating way happy wives have of imagining that no other woman could be so happy nor could possibly decline the honour and bliss to which they have attained. Nell had wasted volumes of sarcasm on the subject.

On this occasion Mrs Paul only received her husband’s remarks anent Nell’s possible engagement with a superior and mysterious smile.

‘How like a woman !’ remarked Mr Paul, helping himself to butter. ‘I don’t believe you are ever happy unless you are weaving a romance for some one or other. Your own romance being ended, you make some one else the centre of one with or without foundation.’

‘Indeed !’ said Mrs Paul indignantly. ‘Just because you are blind to what is going on under your very nose, that is no proof that there is nothing going on. Any one less engrossed than you have been with the parish would have seen that Nell was in love.’

‘Nell in love?’ cried Mr Paul, his eyebrows raised till his forehead was one mass of wrinkles. ‘What will you say next? Why, I never knew her to be in such good spirits or so amusing. It was almost too much at times.’

‘In high spirits, I grant you,’ corrected his wife, ‘at times that is to say; but at other times she would go away by herself, and I have come upon her sitting in front of the fire, with her chin on her hand, looking into the embers as if she were trying to read the future.’

Mr Paul sat, the butter-knife poised in the air, staring at his wife. ‘You must be dreaming,’ he said at last. ‘Nell in love and mooning over the fire? The idea is preposterous. At any rate, it is not likely to be deep.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because she is too volatile. I don’t think Nell is capable of any very deep or constant affection for any one.’

‘Peter,’ said his wife emphatically, ‘as I have already remarked, you do not know the Lestranges, at any rate not Eleanor Lestrangle. If I were asked to pick out one of the deepest and most feeling characters I know I should choose that volatile sister of mine. And that is why I hope this love affair is going to turn out all right; for if it does not, it will go hard with Nell, harder than with most girls.’

‘Well, Basil, I suppose you know your own sister best; but you certainly surprise me. Am I allowed to ask the object of Nell’s deep affection?’

‘Not if you ask like that,’ said Basil; but, as she was simply pining to talk about it, she continued without further encouragement: ‘Nell’s latest admirer is that Mr Neville we met at mother’s when we were in town. You know that fair, bronzed man who talked so cleverly?’

‘What! *that* man, and Nell never spoke to him that even-

ing, so far as I remember ; and I never heard her mention him while she was down here. And if we come to facts, Nell took more notice of the Mr Neville here than she did of him.'

'Exactly,' replied his wife triumphantly.

'I think you are quite mistaken,' declared Mr Paul, 'and I most sincerely trust so, at least as far as Nell is concerned, for I think she is the last person to attract a clever, ambitious man of the world like Mr Neville ; and I can't imagine Nell the wife of a high official in India, nor should I like to think of her going so far away.'

'Contrary attracts contrary,' said Mrs Paul oracularly ; 'and Nell is very adaptable. But time will show which of us is right. In the meanwhile, until we have further information from Nell, let us drop the subject. What are you going to do about the new sexton?'

And then the two plunged into parish matters of all-absorbing interest to them, but deadly dull to the outside world.

Mrs Paul had wisely suggested to her husband that any alterations and innovations which they wished to make should be made at once, before the people had become familiar enough to come up and remonstrate ; and the plan worked very well.

What with parish clubs, social duties, and the cares of a large household, Mrs Paul's life was one incessant rush ; and it would have taxed the strength of a far more robust person than she to stand it. She lived at high pressure indeed, kept up to the mark by her own unselfishness and her husband's ceaseless and untiring energy.

The children, who had now arrived and settled down in their new home, were very happy and very popular. They

too were pressed into the service, and often paid some visit which their mother, with the best will in the world, could not manage to get into her crowded day. So that the goat-carriage, with its white fur rug and the two little red-coated figures in it, as often as not with a napkin-covered basket or some flowers packed between them, became a familiar sight in the village.

Rosie was her mother's own child, and her quaint little remarks were long cherished.

'Good-mornin', Miss Warnes,' she would say. 'Is you better? Muver hopes you is, and sends you some soup what will make you welly well.' Or, 'We's brought you some yellow flowers instead of the sun, as it's sich a dull day.' 'Yes, and your big blue eyes, instead of the blue sky, missy,' would perhaps be the answer, whereat the blue eyes would become more like saucers than ever.

Or sometimes Rosie, acting on her own responsibility, would give good advice.

'You shouldn't be cross wiv' you little children,' she said to a woman whose violence was the terror of her family and the scandal of her neighbours. 'I dersey they's werry aggravating; but so's we to our muver, and she's never cross. She says she prays not to be cross, so p'raps you'd better do that too.'

One day, months after, the woman spoke of these words which had been so innocently spoken, and afterwards they bore fruit.

But the ways of Barton folk required learning.

'Please, mem, old Sally Coleman would like to see you,' announced the housemaid one morning to Mrs Paul.

Mrs Paul rose instantly. It was a rule of hers that be her occupation ever so important, or the interruption ever

so inconvenient, no parishioner was kept waiting unless quite unavoidably. So she left her letters and went at once to the kitchen. There she found the most wizened and unattractive old specimen of feminine humanity she had met so far.

‘Morning, mum, and I hev took the liberty for to bring you a chaney cup and saucer, hearing as you wus so kind to the poor,’ said the old dame, rising from her seat, and curtsying as she drew from under her cloak a queer-looking cup and saucer wrapped up in a very dirty piece of newspaper.

Now, if Mrs Paul had a weakness, it was for collecting old things. Old oak chests filled the house, old china the drawing-room; and as she was profoundly ignorant of such matters her mistakes were many. Still, in this case, she was quite well aware that this offering was of no particular value, though she said with the smile that won the hearts of all the parishioners, ‘Thank you very much, Mrs Coleman. I am much obliged to you.’

The old woman’s face fell. ‘Well, there, I didn’t think you’d go for to insult me like that.’

‘Why, what have I done or said?’ cried Mrs Paul, bewildered at the effect of her innocent remark.

‘Why, a-callin’ me out of my name.’

‘What is your name, then?’

‘Sally, mum—Sally Coleman I be, wi’out I’ve a fell out wi’ any one, and *then* they calls me *Mrs* Coleman,’ with a contemptuous accent on the *Mrs*.

Mrs Paul hastened to repair her error, and Sally was soon appeased and warmed by a cup of tea and hot buttered toast, which Mrs Paul, kneeling before the kitchen fire, made for her as she talked in her sympathetic way to the old crone.



And Sally was soon appeased and warmed by a cup of tea and hot
buttered toast.



But still the old creature lingered, and at last inquired, 'Well, and what be you agoin' to give me for the present?'

'Oh,' said Mrs Paul, much amused, 'I thought you said it was a present?'

'So 'twas,' maintained Sally; 'and ain't you agoin' to give me one?'

Delicacy clearly being at a discount, Mrs Paul demanded what she wanted, whereupon Sally explained:

'Well, that there cup and saucer cost my good man one and threepence, and that's twenty years ago; and things being worth double when they're old—so I hear—I was reckoning as half-a-crown would not be out of the way, if so be as you could make it convenient.'

Mrs Paul could and did make it convenient, and she and her husband thought this, the latest addition to their *bric-à-brac*, the queerest of all. Many a hearty laugh did they have over it; but Mrs Paul had learnt two lessons, which she considered cheap at the price: first, that no Barton woman, even if a grandmother, should be 'called out of her name'—that is to say, called Mrs So-and-so—as it was the custom to use the Christian name; secondly, that when a poor person came with a present to the Vicarage the price must be asked, and that unless she wished to encourage begging she must be firm on the subject.

The spring was advancing, and proved very trying to Mrs Paul, whose laugh did not ring out as often as it used to do, and who would not now be suspected of dancing a hornpipe on a chair at the thought of coming to Barton Vicarage. Basilia Paul had indeed 'toned down' and become a model parson's wife, no low ideal. If Mr Paul's affection for his wife could have become greater, which is doubtful, it would

have done so now, as she threw herself heart and soul into all his plans, and herself suggested and carried out others which furthered the one object they had in view: the physical, mental, and spiritual welfare of the village.

One day, however, Mr Paul was surprised at hearing shrieks of delight from his wife's sitting-room, mingled with shouts for him. He found Mrs Paul lying back in an easy-chair, waving a letter excitedly in one hand, while she had the other pressed to her side to stay the aching her excessive merriment had caused.

‘What in the world’—— began Mr Paul.

‘Read that, Peter,’ cried his wife, holding out the letter to him.

Mr Paul took it and read:

‘MY DEAR BASIL,—I do wish you would not invariably buy too little stuff for your frocks and then send me the round of all the drapers to match half-a-yard for you, especially as I am now otherwise engaged to Mr Neville (not your dear useful parishioner). I went to ten shops, and then could not get an exact match, so send a pattern to know if it will do; and—as we are not going to be married for a year (Mr Neville being obliged to go out to India next month), I think of coming down to you shortly—let me know if I shall bring the stuff with me, and any other commissions or people.—Your loving sister, NELL.’

‘What an extraordinary letter,’ said Mr Paul, with wrinkled brows. ‘If that is an announcement of a marriage, I call it’—— Mr Paul was at a loss to express his opinion of it.

‘Just like Nell,’ his wife wound up for him.

‘As far as I can see, she can’t marry for a year, as she has

to get half-a-yard more ribbon or some such nonsense for you. I don't believe there is anything in it.'

'Well, here is a letter from mother,' said his wife, opening it as she spoke.

'Why did you not open that first,' expostulated Mr Paul, 'instead of wasting time on Nell's rubbish?'

'Oh, listen!' said Mrs Paul, 'and do be nice and not cross.'

'MY DEAREST BASIL,—Nell will have told you that Mr Neville has proposed to and been accepted by her. I wish you could see her; the dear child looks really beautiful. Indeed, this is not a mother's prejudice; every one says so, and her manner to Mr Granville Neville is very pretty. He is a most estimable man, of high character, very determined, and just the steadying influence Nell needs. It is a most desirable match from every point of view. His income is nearly two thousand pounds, and one day he will probably come into some property. The only drawback is that he would take Nell to India for some years. In fact, he would like her to go out with him in a few weeks; but I have vetoed that; and Nell, unselfish as usual, is only anxious to do what other people like. Nell says she is too happy; it frightens her. I think I am too happy in finding such dear husbands for my girls. If Nell and Granville are as happy as you and dear Peter, I have nothing more to wish for.'

There was silence when the letter was read. Mr and Mrs Paul's hands met, and their eyes were moist as they said, 'Dear Nell.'

'We must ask him down here, Peter, and give them a few days together away from friends and congratulations,

which I know she will simply hate. Besides, I should like to become acquainted with my future brother-in-law.'


'Yes, certainly,' agreed her husband. 'I can't imagine Nell in love; but there is clearly no denying it. Well, we shall miss her merry mischievous ways; but such is life, and such are the ways of women.'

Mr Paul was waxing melancholy, and his wife remarked remonstratingly, 'One would think Nell was going to be a missionary on a leper island by the way you talk! She is not going to India yet, and she will be there only for a few years when she does go. Besides, Nell ought to see the world. She was not made for a humdrum life; she was made to shine in society. Oh, I can just imagine her queen-ing it over there in India.' Mrs Paul was growing energetic, then she checked herself and sighed.

And for the first time a faint shadow of a doubt came over the Reverend Peter Paul as to whether his wife enjoyed their life as much as he did. But only for a moment. One look at his wife's happy face convinced him that she would have chosen no other life; and neither then nor ever afterwards did he guess for an instant what a life of self-repression and self-sacrifice was the life led by his bright, handsome, unselfish wife.

CHAPTER VII.

TOO MUCH PHILANTHROPY.

OW, mind, not a word about my engagement, either in the house or out of it.' So wrote Nell. 'Since you are so pressing, I am coming on Monday. You may expect me by the half-past three. Mr Neville'—'Why can't she say Granville?' interpolated Mrs Paul—'Mr Neville will come, *as your friend*, on Wednesday to stay till Saturday.'

'Such nonsense!' declared Mrs Paul to her husband, laughing, as she read Nell's letter aloud. 'As if one could hide a thing of that sort! Besides, if Nell is the transfigured being my mother makes out, it will be visible to the naked eye, so to speak.'

'I cannot see personally why it should not be visible,' said Mr Paul irritably. 'There is nothing to be ashamed of in it; on the contrary, it seems to be a most desirable alliance from all accounts.'

'So it is; but Nell says she won't have it mentioned; so, for peace' sake, let her have her way.'

For reasons best known to herself, Miss Eleanor Lestrangle arrived by an earlier train than the one she had named. Mr and Mrs Paul and the two children were at lunch when the dining-room door opened, and a fresh, breezy young voice was heard saying:

‘Well, Pete, my boy, how are you?’ and he received a pat on the head as his sister-in-law passed on to kiss his wife.

‘Well, you blessed lambs, my blessings on you.—Why, Basil, how very pretty Rosie is growing; rather too angelic I think.—Don’t grow wings, Rosie.’

‘How could I?’ inquired Rosie, looking very much as if she would like to do so.

‘Why have you come by an earlier train than you said you were coming by?’ was Mrs Paul’s apparently inhospitable remark, though it was simply actuated by a desire to get if possible to the bottom of Nell’s doings.

‘Felt that way. Besides, to be strictly correct, I did not say I was *coming* by any train. I said you might expect me by the half-past three train. So you may; and if that does not satisfy you, I wished to avoid a demonstration at the station.’

‘Which end?’ asked Mrs Paul innocently; but this was evidently dangerous ground, and Nell made no reply, only colouring violently. ‘You are looking very well,’ continued Mrs Paul, who was looking so far in vain for that glorified appearance of which her mother had spoken.

Nell looked at her sister. It was on the tip of her tongue to say, ‘I am sorry I cannot return the compliment;’ but she refrained and smiled instead. Then, as if afraid the smile betrayed too much, ‘How,’ she inquired as she ate her lunch with an appetite at all events unimpaired by being in love, ‘is young Will?’

This remark was received in dead silence.

Nell looked from one to the other with mock concern on her face. ‘Not dead, I do hope?’

‘Oh no,’ said little Rosie, ‘he’s quite live, thank you, cos’

I met him this morning, and told him you was coming; and he said that's why the sun was shining so brightly.'

Nell had the grace to blush, and her sister remarked with grim amusement, 'Mr Neville will be edified to hear that your first inquiry on arriving here was for young Will,' which was malicious, as it was a decided play upon the name which Nell's two admirers had in common.

'How's the parish?' said Nell next, anxious to feel safe ground under her feet.

'Pretty well, thank you, Nell,' replied her brother. 'We have a large bazaar coming off in a few months, and we want you to get up some tableaux and theatricals for it.'

'Indeed,' said that young lady, 'would you mind allowing me to digest my lunch first. I think a game of tennis might assist that process, and I am simply pining for one. Will you play a single with me, Peter?'

Mr Paul looked at his wife rather embarrassed. This habit of his of looking at his wife before he answered any one was a source of irritation to Nell.

'Well, what's the matter now? Surely you have not taken to thinking tennis wicked? Or haven't you begun?'

'Oh yes, we have begun,' said Basil; 'but the fact is this is a parish afternoon—that is to say'—as Nell raised her eyes to the ceiling—'three times a week any parishioners who choose can come up and play upon the lawn from two o'clock until dark.'

'What!' cried Nell, 'butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers?'

'There does happen to be a butcher and a baker; but so far no candlestick-maker has joined,' remarked her sister calmly.

'Where,' demanded Nell, 'do you draw the line then?'

‘Nowhere,’ replied Mrs Paul, with grave lips but a suspicious gleam in her eye.

‘And where, pray, do I come in?’ asked Nell.

‘You come in the other three days,’ said her sister severely, ‘unless you choose to play with the parishioners, which by the way would be a very good thing, as they do not know much about the game at present.’

‘Not I,’ replied Miss Lestrangle with decision. ‘Philanthropy is philanthropy, and excellent in its place; but tennis is tennis, and I don’t mix the two. A penny to a blind beggar now and then I have nothing against; but when it comes to playing tennis with a blue-aproned, bloated-looking individual, I don’t see it figuratively or literally. No, it would never do. I should be certain to forget myself, and say, “Your ball, butcher,” or “Take that, baker,” and the fat would be in the fire.’

‘Don’t be absurd, Nell. You do not suppose that they come up to tennis in their working clothes? But’—reflecting—‘on the whole you are best out of it.’

Nell was looking out of the window with an air of dissatisfaction, and now said in her abrupt way, ‘Now, what’s to be done. Here’s a man—a gentleman apparently—coming up the drive to play tennis; at least he is in flannels, and has a racket. Can’t we keep one court to ourselves just for this afternoon?’

Mrs Paul joined her sister at the window, and at sight of the approaching figure her eyes twinkled. ‘Certainly,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you would like to play a single with him. That is Mr Pike the butcher.’

‘Give me a chair, quick, some one,’ cried Nell. ‘I feel giddy; the world’s topsy-turvy, and I don’t know where I are.’

‘Then I will leave you to find out,’ remarked her sister, and she stepped out of the French window and on to the lawn to welcome Mr Pike, who was now followed by others.

Nell watched the game from the dining-room, and admired her brother-in-law’s heroic efforts to keep the ball going, and teach three sets at once how to play tennis, almost as much as she admired her sister’s winning ways with her guests.

She valiantly suppressed her desire to laugh at their clumsy movements; but took revenge for her outward restraint in a graphic description of the scene to her mother. It would not have pleased the Bartonians or their vicar or vicaress if they had known that the mischievous girl had taken them off very cleverly, and likened them to hippopotami playing a comic game of tennis at the Zoo. Nor was the comparison quite fair, for the girls of Barton, many of them, possessed faces and figures that would have graced a London drawing-room. But the letter was an outlet for Nell’s irritation, and, being addressed to Mrs Lestrangle, a very safe one.

When the ‘parish’ had gone, Nell declared that she breathed freely, and said in a cheery, coaxing tone, ‘Now for a cosy evening. Come along, Basil, let’s “tea-gown” this evening, and be comfortable; you look fagged out.’

‘Oh, I don’t feel it, and a good thing too, for we have a boys’ club here for the roughest boys in the village from seven-thirty to nine-thirty, so I think we will not dress to-night, if you do not mind, dear.’

‘I do mind. I mind everything; but much difference that will make,’ objected Nell. ‘What,’ she asked with the calmness of despairing resignation, ‘do they come for?’

‘Well, to be humanised first of all.’

‘By what process?’

‘We have them up one evening a week in the drawing-room, and play games, and’——

Nell jumped up as if she had been shot.

‘On these chairs?’ she exclaimed.

‘Yes, of course,’ said her sister. ‘That is the point.’

‘It is,’ replied Nell, disappearing hastily.

Mrs Paul struggled not to laugh. Nell was heard rummaging in the old oak chest where Mrs Paul kept old illustrated papers which she gave away.

‘Nell,’ she cried, ‘what on earth are you doing at that box?’

Nell made no reply, but presently reappeared, her arms full of papers, with which she elaborately covered her easy-chair and then seated herself upon it with an air of relief.

Mrs Paul wanted badly to laugh, but thought it better not to encourage Nell.

‘Anything else?’ demanded that young lady, continuing the conversation as if there had been no interruption.

‘Well, there’s a cosy evening for girls to-morrow; but they are not rough. The next evening there is a mothers’ meeting.’

Nell listened with an unsympathetic expression.

‘Answer me one thing: Have you *any* evening free?’

‘Not exactly free,’ replied Basil hesitating, as if she had not thought of this before, ‘except Saturdays, and then I generally sit in the study and listen to Peter’s sermon, which he reads aloud to me.’ This as if she were speaking of a great treat.

‘I’m a most unhappy girl,’ said Nell, as she rested her chin on her hands, and leaning forward looked into the fire

as if soliloquising. 'Most unhappy ; my lines have been cast in arid and bitter places. I am like a pelican in the wilderness, or an owl in the desert, or something of that kind.'

'You are like an idiot, or at any rate you are talking like one.' And, as stamping was heard in the hall, 'Go away for goodness' sake, and take those ridiculous newspapers with you, for I hear my boys.'

Miss Lestrangle required no second bidding, but decamped, putting her head in again at the door to implore her sister to have holland chair-covers made for the drawing-room ; and indeed there did seem something incongruous in these ploughboys lolling back on delicate brocaded drawing-room chairs.

'Peter,' remarked Nell as she walked into Mr Paul's study, 'I make no apology for thus invading your sanctum, seeing that I am turned out of my lawful abode, the drawing-room.'

'Oh yes,' said Mr Paul. 'To be sure, the boys' club meets here to-night ; but there is the dining-room.'

'Thanks so much !' drily. 'Not being a ploughboy or butcher, I suppose I must not expect courtesy.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon ; but you know I did not mean that. You are more than welcome here.' And Mr Paul smiled kindly at her. 'Surely, Nell, I need not tell you that ? Here, come and sit in your favourite chair,' and he wheeled a very comfortable-looking rocking-chair to the fire, which, despite the advanced season, looked inviting.

'Any tramps been sitting in it lately ?' queried Nell, eyeing it with suspicion.

'Not that I know of,' laughed Mr Paul, 'unless they come in the night and leave no trace. Why do you ask ?'

'There seems to be a good deal of philanthropy rampant here, and I thought it might include giving tramps free

smokes in your study,' said Nell, as she seated herself in the chair. 'Now, there's a suggestion for you, Peter, free, gratis, for nothing.'

'As I do not consider it any part of my duty to encourage smoking or tramps, I am afraid I cannot avail myself of your suggestion. I'll give you a suggestion instead, also free and gratis, as you express it. Why not announce your engagement? It is not like you to be secretive about anything; besides, people are sure to guess something, and talk, if you do not.'

'Sorry, dear brother-in-law; but I must likewise decline to act on your suggestion; it—does not suit the works.'

'Why not?'

'For several reasons; but first let me tell you that every one who has a right to know—that is, you, Basil, and my nearest relations—do know. Next, I hate being congratulated. Besides, we are not to be married for a year, during which time, seeing that the world divides us, a thousand things may happen to prevent our marrying. We may both die, or one, and then the other won't be able to marry any one else, at least not for some time; and—black is not becoming to'——

'Well, of all the heartless ways of talking'—— began Mr Paul.

'Not at all,' argued his sister-in-law. 'I'm thinking of Mr Neville, to whom I wish to leave a free hand if I succumb under the trials caused by philanthropic relatives. And'——confidentially——'if he died I should hate to be condoled with and have to wear mourning.'

'I do not think we had better pursue the subject any further,' said Mr Paul stiffly. 'I do not like serious matters jested about;' and, amiable in an instant, 'I ought really

to go and help Basil with her boys. I suppose it is no use asking you to come?’

‘Not the slightest,’ replied Nell, settling herself more comfortably in her arm-chair. ‘My talents don’t lie in that direction, and my olfactory nerves are highly sensitive.’

So Mr Paul went off, murmuring something under his breath; but Nell sat, her chin on her hands, gazing into the fire dreaming pleasant dreams, to judge by the soft, happy look which lighted up her expressive face.

But when she and Basil sat together in Mr Paul’s room, having their good-night talk, her explanations were more satisfactory.

‘Basil,’ she said, ‘it is really much better not talked about. You know what one’s friends are: how they would think it necessary to ask if I had heard from India this mail, and if I had not—which would be very likely to be the case, for Granville is often up-country. Think how irritating it would be.’

Now, Basil, who said she knew her sister as well as any one could know that somewhat whimsical young person, never knew whether Nell was giving her real reason for what she chose to do; and she had her doubts on this occasion, as her diplomatic answer showed.

‘There is a good deal in what you say. The only objection is—what about other possible aspirants to your hand? They will think you free to be won, whereas you know you are not.’

‘My dear Basil, I am not so dangerously attractive as all that comes to,’ scoffed Nell; ‘and as for that, I shall take means of keeping proposals off somehow or other, you may trust me.’

And with that Mrs Paul had to be content.

Mr Granville Neville arrived next day : a tall, fair-haired, good-looking man. Nell took elaborate precautions to avoid a scene. Mr Paul was sent to meet his guest at the station, and Nell received him in the drawing-room with her sister.

Mr Paul—who was nothing if not demonstrative, and who kissed his wife in season and out, as Nell complained—declared to Mrs Paul that it was nothing but a *mariage de convenance*, for he could see no trace of affection on either side.

‘You have not seen them alone,’ said Basil.

Apart from absence of visible signs of being in love with his *fiancée*, Mr Neville won golden opinions from his future relations. He proved to be a brilliant conversationalist, and he also managed to draw Nell out in a way that surprised the Pauls ; and Basil noted with satisfaction that their ideas seemed to harmonise, and that when they did not Mr Neville was at some pains to ascertain Nell’s and to try to bring them into accord.

Mr Neville was a very aristocratic-looking man, decidedly handsome, and unmistakably a man of the world ; but he was also unmistakably a man of high principle and possessed a very kind heart. He smoked little, and drank less. He evidently had a strong will of his own, which Mr and Mrs Paul considered a most necessary quality for Nell’s husband to possess ; and, finally, he got on well with Mr Paul. ‘I would defy a bad man to do that,’ said his wife ; which was high praise, but praise truly merited.

And as for Mr Granville Neville, the life at Barton Vicarage was a revelation to him. His admiration for Mrs Paul was unbounded ; but his comments on the situation were shrewd.

‘I should say that your sister was a case of a square person

in a round hole ; only,' correcting himself, 'she has rounded off her corners so successfully that the simile hardly holds good.'

'It is a horrid waste this life for her,' replied Nell impetuously.

Mr Neville stroked his blonde moustache thoughtfully as he looked down at Nell. 'I don't know that I should call it that,' he said hesitatingly. 'It is a sacrifice of one for many. I should not allow my wife to work herself like that, nor should I wish her to sink her individuality in every way, as Basil does in such uncongenial work. Still'——

'Oh, Basil really likes doing good. She simply cannot help doing kind, unselfish things. It is a second nature to her.'

'I believe you,' said Mr Neville heartily ; 'but I should advise you, while you are staying here, to try and put on the brake a bit. Your sister cannot possibly keep up her present pace with safety. Meanwhile, I would not for worlds have you go in for this sort of thing, and I am not sure that I approve of the sanctity of home being destroyed as it is here. Still, I am glad to have had a sight of the life those two—in fact, you might say those four, for the children seem to enter into it too—lead. It makes one wish to be a better man.'

And if his *fiancée* thought this impossible, yet she was glad to hear him speak thus, for she was half afraid of the way the simple, unworldly life led at Barton Vicarage might strike the man of the world.

Eleanor Lestrangle was not pretty ; her auburn hair, her expressive eyes, and fresh complexion were her only claims to beauty. But she was so bright and merry and fascinating when she chose that people very often called her so, and her future husband said and really believed that she was the prettiest girl in the world.

This is a matter not to be explained.

The day of Mr Neville's departure arrived. Nell was apparently as merry and light-hearted as ever, though at breakfast her sister observed violet rims round her eyes, which told a tale.

Some one spoke of a year as a long time.

'Oh dear, no,' interposed Nell hastily. 'Only fifty-two weeks, and a week is nothing. Look how this one has flown.'

Every one laughed, as Nell, seeing her slip, blushed; and Mr Neville helped her to keep up by talking continually on public topics; and Nell did keep up even in the last parting scene.

'Promise me one thing,' said Mr Neville as he held Nell's face between his two hands.

'I promise,' said Nell.

'What! before knowing?' but he looked pleased. 'Well, you were quite safe. I want you to tell me everything when you write, every trouble of any kind that you have, and then I shall feel quite comfortable about you. Otherwise, I should be afraid if your letter seemed less cheery than usual that you were keeping something back from me.'

Then he caught her to him, passionately kissed her, and was gone, shutting the study door, where the two had elected to say good-bye, behind him. Mrs Paul and the children went to the front door to see him off, and to wave handkerchiefs, and Mr Paul drove him to the station; but Nell did not appear at the window even, which Mr Paul thought 'very odd.'

After some time Mrs Paul could restrain herself no longer, and made some excuse to go into the study. Her heart was aching for her younger sister. At first glance no Nell was

to be seen ; then Mrs Paul looked down, and there was Nell stretched at her feet.

‘I never knew her do such a thing before,’ said Mrs Paul, much distressed ; and Nell never had.

‘Oh dear!’ cried Nell, when she recovered consciousness and saw her sister bending over her. ‘I’ve been—asleep. How stupid of me.’

Mrs Paul let the fiction pass, and only said gently, ‘Well, come into the air ; it is the best refresher in the world.’

Nell gave a long shiver, and then, with an impatient shake of her shoulders, cried, ‘Yes, come along,’ and gave a laugh which sounded very like a sob.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS NELL'S THEATRICALS.



BEFORE I throw my valuable energies into this bazaar of yours I must know whether the object is a worthy one—one on which I can set the seal of my approval,' observed Nell at breakfast.

'The object is twofold,' replied Mr Paul, with a smile at his sister's patronising airs: 'first, to get money to put the churchyard in order; second, to build a house for boys' and girls' clubs, and other parish meetings.'

'Excellent! most excellent!' cried Nell, with emphatic approval, 'both of them. The churchyard, overgrown with nettles, is a disgrace to Barton; and the invasion of the sanctity of home'—Mrs Paul looked suspiciously at Nell; it was as well that she did not know that this was not original—'by the aforesaid clubs is or will be a disgrace to the drawing-room chairs and carpet. I'm your man—oh, well!' as she saw pending rebuke on the faces of her brother and sister, 'I set the seal of my approval on the concern, if that suits you better. What can I do?'

Mr Paul, quietly ignoring Nell's nonsense, proceeded to unfold his plans. 'We thought of having a preliminary entertainment this spring to raise money to work for the bazaar, which is to take place in a few months.'

Nothing could have suited Nell's present mood better than

to throw herself violently into some such occupation. Even Basil, who really did see more under the surface of her sister than any one else, would not have guessed that the girl missed her lover if she had not had the recollection of that sudden faint and Nell's white face of misery when she recovered consciousness. This was the less surprising, as Nell wasted an infinity of pains to conceal the state of her feelings from every one, even going so far as to write her Indian letters in her bedroom, and post them herself at the post-office, while all her other correspondence was placed in the usual way in the post-box in the hall for public inspection. It was not until a time long distant that her brother came to believe in Nell's marriage being other than a marriage of convenience.

'Well,' said that volatile young person, 'I will undertake the entertainment with pleasure, provided I am allowed to choose my own materials and am given a month to get it up in.'

'A month! Will you want as long as that?' asked Mr Paul. 'That brings us rather far into June, which is late enough for that kind of thing.'

'Not down here. Besides, we shall interest so many people in it that it will be bound to be a success. Don't worry; you have enough on your hands without entertainments. How much money do you want?'

'We should like to clear twenty pounds; but, of course, you could not'—

'Say no more; you shall have them. Hey, presto! by the middle of June I will hand you over twenty golden sovereigns or their equivalent. And now being *satt*—which is not short for satisfied, but in a foreign tongue—I will go and interview old Mrs Bicknell as a preliminary step.

She is a dear and an excellent musician, and as she takes singing and music pupils she will be able to tell me of all the local talent the place contains.'

'That will be an excellent plan; and she would play the accompaniments for you,' Mrs Paul said, looking suspiciously pleased. Nell could not for some time fathom this; then, as she was talking to Mrs Bicknell, the truth flashed across her, and Mrs Paul would not have looked so pleased if she had seen the smile that flitted across her face. Mrs Bicknell was indeed 'up' in the accomplishments and capabilities of every one, high and low, in Barton.

'As for girls, there are plenty, and pretty ones too, if, as you say, you do not want ladies; but young men, musical and good-looking, will be a harder matter to find. There's Major Mulvaney's son—he has a nice voice, and is not at all bad-looking; and the young doctor—but he is very shy—I doubt—but you can ask him—he may do it for you; and Mr Pike the butcher, he's handsome, and he's in the choir. But how you are going to mix them all up I'm sure I don't know. But there, your dear sister does it somehow, and it seems to work all right.'

'Oh, I shall try and keep the tableaux to sets as much as possible; that is to say, I shall not mix up, as you call it, the gloving girls' (Barton was the centre of the glove trade) 'with the Major's son, nor the butcher with the lawyer's pretty daughter.'

'Well, no! I should hope not,' cried Mrs Bicknell horrified, 'for Lawyer Sykes's pretty daughter, as you call her—though I can't see anything in her myself—is as proud as Lucifer. Well, there, I don't know what she has to be proud of, when her grandfather was just a working farmer, for all they hold their heads so high now.'

All this time the best voice, and in Miss LeStrange's private opinion the nicest-looking man, in Barton had not been mentioned; and now Nell remembered what had until this moment escaped her memory. 'Of course,' she said to herself, 'Mr William Neville and Mrs Bicknell are at daggers drawn;' and then it was that Nell smiled a wicked smile. So this was why her sister had looked so pleased.

'Oh ho, Mistress Basil! You thought you had done the trick, did you? Well, you were premature in your satisfaction. If I do not have Mr Will Neville, junior, in my entertainment my name is not Eleanor LeStrange, which it is. Does she suppose it is the name which attracts me?' And then Miss LeStrange curled her lips scornfully. 'It is an insult to Granville even to think of such things,' she said to herself.

Dismissing this thought from her mind, Nell said to Mrs Bicknell, who wondered what she had said to call up such an expression on her young visitor's face, 'Of course, one must respect people's prejudices; and the fact that all sorts and conditions of people are taking part in this entertainment does not mean that they must necessarily hob-nob together. We need not all rehearse at the same time till just the last. In fact, I think it will be better not to, as that only means jealousy and quarrels as a rule.'

'There now, look over the way, Miss Nell. There's young Mr Mulvaney coming out from the bank opposite. It's not for the money he draws that he goes there for certain, for it's little of that the Mulvaney's have; but they do say he's sweet on Mary, the bank manager's daughter.'

Nell went over to the window.

'He looks very presentable,' she remarked. 'But how the

men here do slouch along. I never see any of them walk briskly or as if they had an object in life.'

'Ah! you are used to the bustle of London. We are not in such a hurry down here. For my part, I'm glad of it. I always feel as if some dreadful accident were happening when I first arrive at a London station, there's such shouting and rushing about.'

Nell laughed. 'Well, I am going to make some of you rush about and shout over this show of mine, I can assure you. I think it will be a charitable act to give the good folk of Barton something to talk about instead of the everlasting scandal that forms the chief topic of conversation with most of them.'

'Indeed, you are right there, Miss Lestrangle,' said Mrs Bicknell with unexpected energy. 'There's that Miss Nesbit now. Why, she simply lives on gossip. When I see her running from house to house, as she does, with her little pattering steps, I always wonder what her latest is, and only hope I am not in it.'

Her listener could hardly keep her countenance, remembering how she had been warned against Mrs Bicknell and her scandal-mongering propensities. Why is it that the greatest offenders in this respect are always the loudest in their condemnation of the practice? Probably from want of that power for which the poet prays that would 'the giftie gi'e us to see ourselves as others see us'—a gift the shock of which would require a saint to receive with equanimity. As Nell did not see her way to bestowing any such gift upon Mrs Bicknell, she now took her leave to pay a call on the aforesaid Miss Nesbit, who lived at the Old Vicarage House a few doors up the long, irregular village street.

'Miss Nesbit,' she said, as she seated herself on the old oak

settle in Mrs Seaman's kitchen, 'do you wish to circumvent a gross injustice?'

'Now, I wonder what you mean, Miss Nell,' replied the little spinster, as she stopped for a moment stirring something in a saucepan, and turned from the fire with a spoon in her hand. 'Oh yes, I understand the words well enough; but very often with you I find there's something underneath. You've got ways of putting things,' nodding her head.

Nell laughed, slightly embarrassed, if the truth be told, at the shrewdness of the old village teacher. 'Honesty is clearly the best policy with you at all events. So here goes. You must know that I am getting up an entertainment?'

'To be sure,' replied Miss Nesbit promptly, to Nell's surprise, who thought she was imparting some news. 'And you have been to Mrs Bicknell's to ask her to play your pieces for you, no doubt, and you are going to ask young Arnold Mulvaney to help; at least Mr Toms the bank manager saw you get up to look after him, so I suppose she has been suggesting him to you.'

Nell groaned. 'Good gracious! Is there anything else you or any one else does not know about me or any one else? Upon my word, talk about monstrosities at Barnum's show; they live a life of retirement compared with dwellers in this village.'

'Oh no; not all the dwellers, Miss Nell; but you must expect the Vicarage dwellers to be talked about. Besides, we have been talking about this entertainment that you were going to get up for some time; so, of course, when I saw you go into Mrs Bicknell's so early, I guessed. And, besides, you must expect people to be interested in you.'

'Why, pray?'

A Plucky Girl.

‘Well, for one thing, you are a young unmarried lady, and that is always interesting; and besides, you see, you seem different from other young ladies somehow.’

‘I don’t see,’ observed Nell shortly, being always averse to discussing herself. ‘But to come to the point, the injustice is to Mr William Neville, junior. Ah! that interests you,’ as Miss Nesbit took her saucepan off the fire and seated herself in an attitude of attention. ‘You see I want him in the tableaux.’

‘With Mrs Bicknell there and all? You’ll never manage it. Why, they don’t speak.’

‘I don’t care,’ said Nell. ‘Have him I will. If they won’t speak, they won’t, that’s all; but we are short of men, not to mention that it would look pointed to leave him out; and I am not to be expected to know all the petty quarrels of the place.’

‘But won’t you feel rather uncomfortable and find it awkward?’ asked Miss Nesbit rather anxiously.

‘Not I,’ replied Nell airily. ‘But I’ll tell you what. I should like to see Mr Neville about it, only—really, in the face of all this gossip—I am afraid to stop him if I meet him. Could you ask him to meet me here some afternoon?’

‘I can manage better than that for you. He is at this minute in what you call the little cottage next door, which is really his lawyer’s office, and belongs to this house. It has a back door into our garden. I’ll fetch him in to speak to you that way.’

Oh what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive.

It was on the tip of Nell’s tongue to reject the suggestion; but her irrepressible love of fun and doing out-of-the-way deeds led her to accept Miss Nesbit’s proposal. She accord-

ingly followed her guide along the flagged path down to the back door of Mr Neville's little office, and waited while Miss Nesbit knocked at the door.

'Will! Will!' cried Miss Nesbit in a stage whisper, 'Miss Lestrangle wants to speak to you privately.'

'I do not,' interposed Nell in her natural voice.

The door opened instantly. 'Come in, Miss Lestrangle. Welcome to my den.—Come in, Miss Nesbit,' said Mr Neville in his straightforward, kindly way.

'I can't, Will. I'm just dishing up the old lady's dinner, and I must look after her while she eats it, or she may choke herself or something.' And, despite Nell's protests, she vanished.

Mr William Neville was only a lawyer in a country village; but he was a gentleman by instinct and of quick sympathies. So he said, 'I suppose it is the entertainment I hear you are going to get up which has gained me the honour of this interview?' Then, seeing that Nell was not quite at her ease, he added, 'I am afraid you must find this office of mine close and musty. Shall we walk in Mrs Seaman's garden and talk there?'

'I think it would be nicer,' said Nell with relief. 'My ideas always seem to flow easier in the open air.'

But to-day Nell's ideas did not seem to 'flow.' She had an uncomfortable feeling that she had better have left this particular young man alone; and the feeling arose more from what he did not say than what he did say. However, he proved a most valuable ally and a tactful one withal; and between them a programme was practically drawn up, and Mr Neville promised to bring some plays to the Vicarage for Nell to look over.

It was also arranged that the play in which Mr Neville

was to act should be rehearsed at the Old Vicarage House, while the tableaux and songs for which Mrs Bicknell was accompanist should be practised at the Vicarage proper.

The play chosen was *The Area Belle*.

'Who,' demanded Mrs Paul, 'are the actors?'

'The *dramatis personæ*,' said Nell with an assurance which she was far from feeling, 'are: Mr Mulvaney, a policeman; Mr Will Neville, a milkman; and Major Newcome, a soldier; I'm the servant—I hope no one from the gallery will ask which is the belle; and Major Newcome's sister is the mistress.'

'And all these young men are your lovers?' asked Mrs Paul.

'There's safety in numbers,' was Nell's reply.

Mrs Paul tried to console herself with this view of the matter. The thought had not occurred to her that Nell would herself act.

The tableaux, which were rehearsed at the Vicarage, progressed with the usual number of hitches and trials. No one would take an ugly part. It required all Nell's powers of persuasion and coaxing to smooth things over. She had set her heart on the hackneyed subject of Bluebeard, that she might curdle the blood of the old people by the 'beheaded wives' scene.

'Now, who will be Bluebeard's five beautiful wives?' she inquired diplomatically.

Every one was anxious for the honour, and looked it. Nell chose five of the palest beauties. 'Now, we need not rehearse that scene until the night of the performance,' she said with the subtlety of a Machiavelli. 'You are behind a sheet, with only your heads seen, and your hair hung up above your heads. I'm glad you have all got nice dark hair.'

'Hum!' said Mrs Paul after this, one of the final rehearsals. 'I do not look forward to this entertainment of yours with unmixed satisfaction, Nell, when those five girls find out what frights you are making of them.'

'Oh, but I shall tell them they look first-rate; and so they will, from a showman's point of view, especially when we turn on the blue light.'

'Yes; but their friends in the hall will tell them a different tale after the entertainment, and your popularity will be a wreck.'

'Oh, after!' said Nell carelessly. 'I sha'n't care what happens after.'

But she did.

The night of Miss Nell's theatricals came. The small play came first, and was an unbounded success. Mrs Paul trusted that no one would notice how much reality there was in the milkman's love-making, and she mentally decided that there should be no more theatricals under Nell's management.

'Sleeping Beauty' went off with its usual éclat, and 'Bluebeard' followed. The beautiful wives began to have their doubts when they saw the patches of red chalk on the sheets under their chins, and felt their hair being dragged up by Nell's ruthless hands—up, up—they knew not where.

'What's the red for, Miss Nell?' asked one innocent girl.

'Gore, my dear.—More gore, please, Major; more gore, quick. For Bluebeard's wives they don't look half ghastly enough.'

'Ghastly!' cried one rather pretty girl. 'I don't want to look ghastly.'

'My dear girl, you look first-rate. Only keep still. Now, Major Newcome, turn on the blue light, and set the salt

on fire.' He did so, and the curtain rose on a most gruesome scene. There were shrieks and shudders from the unsophisticated audience, followed by vociferous applause. But the girls were furious; they felt that they had been duped. It was especially awkward, as the next tableaux were 'Love' and 'Hate.' The impersonators were two of Bluebeard's wives; but nothing would induce them to appear again. 'Love' looked at her diaphanous draperies, unmoved by them or her lover's entreaties. 'Hate,' though she looked the character, declined to represent it in public.

'What shall I do? I have drilled the girls so,' cried Nell in despair to some of her helpers, among whom was Mr Neville.

'Do them yourself, Miss Lestrangle,' said Major Newcome. 'Here, drape this pale-blue over your blue print.—And, Neville, go and fix up "Love's" young man for us.'

Easier said than done. 'Love' required his attentions herself. Time was precious; the audience was getting impatient. Mr Neville did not hesitate. Quick as thought he had struggled into the get-up for the male figure, and appeared in it.

'You!' cried Nell.

'Yes,' he replied hastily. 'Mr Love turned crusty, thanks to Mrs Love. Come along; it's only a minute.'

But what a minute! When Mrs Paul saw the curtain rise on the tableau 'Love,' and Nell and Mr William Neville with hands clasped and love-lit eyes (for Nell was an actor born, and Mr Neville, alas! needed not to act), she felt like choking. From her husband she heard the nearest approach to bad language into which that good man could be betrayed. A sensation passed through the hall. What did it matter that Nell looked beautiful, that it brought down the house?

That only made the matter worse. Basil felt that she should hiss or do something desperate if the curtain rose again. But Nell knew better. The curtain went up; but on 'Hate.' Nell managed to throw a concentrated amount of aversion and hatred into her looks, and indeed she felt a sudden repulsion from her companion; but this was beyond young William Neville. He simply looked crushed. It made an excellent tableau from an artistic point of view, as indeed from that of the audience, which applauded whole-heartedly; but from Mr and Mrs Paul's it was simply objectionable in the highest degree. They did not even know about the chapter of accidents which had led to the change of actors, and they waited for their sister at the end of the performance in grim silence. Nell had given Barton subject for conversation with a vengeance.

'Off she goes to-morrow,' said Mrs Paul to her husband with vehemence.

'She cannot do that; it will only add to the talk. But I will soon put an end to *that* flirtation, for I shall just tell young Will of her engagement, whether she likes it or not.'

But Mr Paul did not after all perform this duty, for the very sufficient reason that Mr Neville was already enlightened.

Granville Neville had, of course, given his *fiancée* a handsome diamond ring, which she wore round her neck; and in the interval after the historic tableaux Nell snapped the chain on which it hung, and slipped the ring on her engagement finger. It was partly an impulse of loyalty to Granville and partly a warning to Mr William Neville. He saw it at once: what did he not see that concerned her?

‘What does that mean?’ he asked under his breath, as they stood aside for a moment.

‘What it generally does mean,’ replied Nell.

‘You are engaged?’

Nell inclined her head. The ring had done its work, but it remained in its rightful place. And Nell to her dying hour never forgot William Neville’s face. He looked as if he had received his death-blow. In a way he had; but though Nell blamed herself, and rightly so, it was not altogether her fault. To begin with, Mr Neville had fallen an easy prey at first sight, and no amount of snubbing would have prevented his falling in love with Nell; and on Nell’s side there was this to be said, that the fact of her engagement being always in her mind, she felt a certain freedom when talking to men, and she was not aware that this manner of hers was misleading.

All the same, Miss Eleanor Lestrange was quite aware that she was amusing herself *pour passer le temps* at poor Mr Neville’s expense.

Mrs Paul felt that the sum cleared, more than twenty pounds, was dearly gained. And as for Nell, she arrived at the Vicarage on the eventful evening utterly collapsed and dejected.

‘Yes, I know,’ she remarked, as she sank on the sofa in the drawing-room, quite forgetting in her deep depression her usual ostentatious dusting of any seat she occupied in that room. ‘Say what you like, I’m past caring. I am a cruel monster, blunderer, anything you like; only give me something hot, and let me go to bed.’

CHAPTER IX.

FROM DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW.



WHEN Nell did the best thing to be done under the circumstances. She had a bad attack of influenza, and very nearly died, which quite ousted any other topic of conversation; and hints dropped by Mr and Mrs Paul as to the anxiety felt in India put an end to any idea of coupling her name with Mr William Neville's. So the gossip, which might have been very unpleasant, was averted. Miss Nell was a good actress, the people thought; that was all. As for Mr William Neville, he was in love, that was plain; but whose fault was that but his own? So said the village gossips, with one exception. That exception was Miss Nesbit. The foolish old thing was devoted to Will Neville, and had secretly tried to throw him in Nell's way, and she was very angry when she heard of her engagement.

'The deceitful minx!' she made the mistake of saying to young William.

But he turned on her fiercely. 'Deceitful? Why? Because she does not choose to take a lot of strangers into her confidence about her private matters?'

'Well, you can't deny she flirted shamefully with you, William?'

'I can deny it, and I do,' he declared. 'She was no more civil to me than to any one else in Barton.'

‘What, after meeting you here privately?’ cried Miss Nesbit indignantly.

‘There was no private meeting, except in your own head, my dear old Nesbit,’ said William firmly. ‘And I hope you will never say such a thing again, either to yourself or to any one else. You won’t, if you want to remain my friend.’

And Miss Nesbit saw that he meant what he said.

‘Well, I suppose you are going to deny that you like Miss Lestrangle?’ said Miss Nesbit, baffled on all points.

‘No, I am not going to deny that,’ said William wearily, as he leant back in the arm-chair looking very tired, and Miss Nesbit thought very ill. ‘I don’t care to take every one into my confidence, though I’m afraid my admiration has been rather too apparent; but I don’t mind telling *you* that I have loved her from the first moment I saw her. But I always knew it was madness, even if I had an honourable name to offer her,’ and he laughed bitterly for him. ‘She is miles above me. Oh yes, I know you think me good enough for a princess of the blood-royal; but one may as well look facts in the face.’

‘Well, William,’ said Miss Nesbit, ‘I won’t say anything to hurt you if you feel like that; but I suppose I may say that I hope you’ll get a better wife than she’d have made you.’

Mr William Neville only said ‘Thank you.’ Miss Nesbit had expected him to vow eternal celibacy; but she did not know her man. His one aim just now was to make as little of the affair as possible, for Nell’s sake. And if he did not succeed in making Miss Nesbit feel friendly to Eleanor Lestrangle he at least stopped the only tongue inclined to be bitter against her.

And Nell? The vehemence with which she had thrown herself into the organisation of her entertainment, and the

overstrung state of her nerves, had a good deal to do with the strong grip the influenza took of her. It was three weeks since 'Miss Lestrangle's theatricals,' of which the village and country round long talked with admiration, and Nell was only just struggling back to convalescence. Of all the trying patients possible, Nell was the most trying.

Basil came up one day to find the housemaid carrying a small shovel on which lay several pieces of coal, each wrapped up separately in newspaper.

'What in the world?'—— she began.

'Oh, if you please, it's Miss Nell. She can't abear the noise of coals being put on, and so she says, "stick 'em hon with your fingers," mum; which I can't do that, else my 'ands will get so dirty, and I'm afraid for my life to do her grate up.'

Mrs Paul could scarcely help laughing, but the girl looked so distressed that her mistress guessed she was having a bad time with Nell, and good-naturedly took the coal-shovel from her, and said, 'You had better let the grate alone for to-day, and I will make up the fire.' When she opened the door, Nell gave an impatient movement.

'Oh,' she said with evident relief, 'I thought it was that hippopotamus who had been gamboling about this room!'

'Poor Emma!' laughed Mrs Paul. 'Look what pains she has taken to prevent the coals from making a noise;' and she showed Nell the shovel.

Nell could not help laughing, and looked, as well she might, ashamed of herself.

'I'm a beast,' she said frankly; 'but if you knew how every sound sends a shiver from my spine to my finger-tips, you would not wonder at me. I have not your capacity for bearing pain.' She had not indeed.

Mrs Paul's thoughts were so little occupied with herself that she made light even of severe physical pain, with the result that no one knew how often she went on with her various engagements when she was utterly unfit to do so.

'I am so sorry for you, Nell!' she said.

Mrs Paul, though very impulsive, was an undemonstrative woman as a rule, except to her husband; and Nell privately doubted whether this was not a concession to his very demonstrative nature. But she had the power of throwing a vast amount of sympathy into her voice and manner. She did so now, and the effect on Nell was to break down her natural reserve.

'Oh, Basil! I am miserable, abjectly miserable,' cried Nell.

'What is it, dear?' she asked.

'I want Granville,' said Nell like a child, as she burst into tears.

'Oh, you dear baby!' cried her sister. 'Come, cheer up. Two months have gone; there are only ten more, and you will have him always.'

'Yes; but these seven weeks—it is not two months, Basil—have been like seven years, and there are forty-five more. And if they are going to be like forty-five years, why I shall be gray-headed and wrinkled when he comes home, and he won't care for me any more,' and Nell burst into fresh tears.

'This will never do,' said Mrs Paul firmly, rising and ringing the bell. 'You will make yourself very ill if you give way like this.'

Having sent the maid for some wine, she made Nell drink it.

And then Nell said, 'Basil, I want to know something. How is Mr William Neville?'

‘Don’t you think,’ remarked her sister drily, ‘that one Mr Neville is enough for you to worry over?’

‘A great deal too much, if you come to that,’ said Nell; ‘but you might answer my question.’

‘He has had influenza, like three-fourths of the inhabitants of this place; but he is better, at least so he told Peter, who saw him yesterday.’

‘Basil, don’t tease. You know very well what I mean.’

‘If you mean, is that young man dying of a broken heart, thanks to your bad treatment, I am happy to say that I believe he is not.’

‘That’s a mercy!’ said Nell, who meant what she said, and after this cheered up wonderfully. ‘Now, you can go away and lie down; you look more fit to be in bed than I; and send little Rosie to me. That child is a veritable Sister of Charity, and is the only person who can walk about a room quietly.’

Mrs Paul departed as desired, and sent Rosie to her aunt; but she did not lie down, as she would have done if she had been wise. She had a thousand-and-one things to do. Her correspondence alone would have been enough for some women, for she had friends everywhere, of all sorts and conditions of men and women, who made large demands upon her time and her ever-ready sympathy and kindness. Then there were the accounts of various village charities to be kept.

Mr Paul, energetic as he was, could only get through his writing-work by rising at six, and this he did every morning, summer and winter; otherwise he said he should never do any visiting in the parish, and this sometimes irksome part of a parish priest’s duty he was very conscientious in performing. The above-said duty—which in this case was a

pleasure—took Mr Paul to the bedside of Mr William Neville, who had been worse than Mrs Paul knew.

William Neville liked Mr Paul very much, and was delighted to see him; but, having answered queries about his health with his usual cheeriness, he fidgeted about and appeared to find his pillows very uncomfortable by the way he punched them about. He asked Mr Paul in a would-be natural tone whether all his household were progressing favourably. As Nell was the only avowed invalid in the Vicarage, Mr Paul took the inquiry in the way it was meant.

‘Yes, thank you, William,’ he replied. ‘We have all escaped the “complaint,” as they call it down here, with the exception of Miss Lestrangle, who has had it badly, but is out of danger now, thank God! She will go home as soon as she is convalescent; but we shall not let her go as soon as she wishes, for fear her mother, who is delicate, should catch it.’

‘I am glad we are not to lose Miss Lestrangle yet,’ said William quietly.

Mr Paul considered, then he said, ‘Oh, she will go as soon as she can get out, so I think we may consider that she has said good-bye to the parish for some time. To tell you the truth, William,’ Mr Paul continued in a burst of confidence, ‘much as I like my sister-in-law, I find her somewhat of a handful; and I think, though there is absolutely no harm in her fun, that it is liable to be misunderstood by the people here.’

But Mr Paul was unprepared for the tempest he aroused.

‘Misunderstood!’ cried William at white heat, ‘an angel from heaven would be misunderstood if he were misguided enough to come to this village. Miss Nell—I beg your pardon, every one here calls her that—has just been the life

of the place since she has been here. An old crippled woman near this, who has her chair put near the window, told me the other day that it made her feel better just to see Miss Lestrangle pass by always with a smile on her face and her eyes twinkling with fun. She is the one consistently cheerful and unselfish person in Barton; and now you are going to send her away for fear of the hateful gossips down here.'

Now there were two reasons why this speech should displease the vicar, and it was indeed very unlike William's usual tact to have made it. In the first place, William betrayed therein, as much by his tone and manner as by what he said, his real feelings towards Nell. In the second place, by his unstinted praise of her he unconsciously cast a slur on Mr and Mrs Paul, whose incessant and praiseworthy efforts to elevate and brighten the lives of the Bartonians he thus ignored.

However, Mr Paul never gave way to anger, and to harbour malice was an impossibility to him, so he answered quietly enough, 'I am obliged by your good opinion of my sister-in-law. All the same, my wife and I will be very glad when Mr Neville comes back to make her his wife.'

Mr Paul had forgotten the similarity of names. As a matter of fact, Mr William Neville was always 'young William,' or 'young Mr William,' in Barton, according to the status of the speaker, so that he did not know that it was the name, not the statement of her engagement, which overturned William Neville's self-control. To think that Nell was to bear the name of Neville sent a thrill through him; and when he remembered it was as the wife of another, a groan broke from him.

'William, my dear boy, you don't mind my noticing. I

am so sorry about it. Try and pull yourself together and be a man. She would never have done for you.'

'Oh, I know that, vicar. Don't, for goodness' sake, think that I was so presumptuous as to think of such a thing. I am a weak idiot to give way like this. And I have no one but myself to blame, remember that.'

The vicar privately held a different opinion on this subject; but he knew better than to argue with a man who was in love, so he merely said, 'I should not think you in the least presumptuous if Nell were free; but I should consider you very unwise to want to marry her, for she would not have made you happy. My young sister wants some one with a strong will who can manage her. I should be sorry to tackle that young lady myself.'

'Thank you, vicar; it was good of you to say that about my not being presumptuous, and I know you mean kindly by all you say. But'—he gave a kind of laugh—'I would have risked my happiness. However, it is not to be. I don't mean to break my heart, and I wish my namesake joy, and congratulate him from the bottom of my heart on his good luck.'

And then this Mr Neville lay back, looking so white and exhausted that the vicar took his leave, haunted with qualms as to his success as a comforter on this occasion. But Mr Paul need not have feared; he had done William good, not harm. The latter perceived that unless he wished Nell to be blamed, he must make an effort to get well, and appear his own cheery self again; and this he proceeded to try and be. Quite the same he could not be, for the influenza had seized upon his weak spot, the lungs, and he was obviously not strong; but this, alas! was the fate of so many that it was laid to the charge of the common foe.

Meanwhile, Nell on the very same afternoon had been having a conversation on much the same topic, but from a different point of view.

Little Rosie arrived, her tiny hands full of flowers which the child, with a heroic disregard of the rain, had been out to pick for poor Auntie Nell. Having ensconced herself in a large chair by the bed, she folded her hands and sat there quite quietly, waiting to see what Nell wished her to do.

‘Well, nurse,’ said Nell, who knew that this title delighted and, indeed, was very appropriate to her little niece, ‘and how are all your patients?’

Mrs Paul did not believe children caught influenza, and she accordingly used Rosie as visitor just now while she had Nell ill on her hands. And the sick people had no more welcome visitor.

‘Some is better—and some isn’t,’ replied Rosie, who was much older than her speech.

‘Which are better?’ inquired Nell.

‘Miss Warner is better, and so is Miss Nesbit, and so is Mr William; but Miss White is not feeling so well to-day, and Sally Coleman is that bad she doesn’t know how to abear it.’

‘Sally gets very bad when she wants beef-tea or brandy,’ said Nell unsympathetically; ‘never mind her. Who told you Mr William Neville was better?’

‘He did his self.’

‘Have you seen him then?’

‘Course; three times,’ replied the little girl; ‘and I was his werry first visitor.’

‘And what did he say to you, pray?’ said Nell.

‘He said lots of things. He said he was better, worse luck, and then he said that was nonsense; and he said I

smoozed his pillows first-rate ; and he said "How was Auntie Nell?" and I was to smooze your pillows just as I did his, and you'd soon get well. And I asked him if he didn't love you?"

'Good heavens!' cried Nell, forgetting, in her natural excitement, her weakness, and sitting up. 'You never asked him that, surely? What possessed you?'

Rosie looked with innocent surprise at her aunt. 'I said I was so sorry you was ill, because I love you more'n any one, 'cept mother and father; and he said he was sorry too, so I asked him if he loved you.'

Nell sank back exhausted. 'What did he say?' she asked in a choked voice.

'He said he wouldn't exactly say that; but he was very sorry you was ill, and he said he was not surprised I loved you, and I was to take great care of you and make you get well soon.'

Nell breathed again. 'Well, it did not matter this time,' she observed; 'but you must never ask young men—or any sort of men—if they love me. Remember that, Rosie, won't you?'

And Rosie promised faithfully.

CHAPTER X.

CHANGE OF SCENE.



UNE was over when Nell, a shadow of her former self, arrived at her home in town, accompanied by her married sister.

‘I’ll tell you what, mother,’ the latter remarked to Mrs Lestrangle—when, having put the invalid to bed, much against her will, the two were sitting at the window looking into the West End square in which Mrs Lestrangle lived—‘you must take Nell somewhere for a change. She is, remarkable as the fact may appear, pining for that young man of hers; and to try and make the time pass quickly, she does all sorts of things, wise and unwise, chiefly the latter. I feel very ungrateful talking like this about Nell, when she has apparently just been working so hard for us; but to tell you the truth, I am of the opinion that a bazaar for the Mormons would have excited just as much of her sympathy and energy.’

It was a half-truth, and perhaps Mrs Lestrangle knew this; for she must have been aware that Nell was always trying to relieve her sister of some of her duties, only drawing the line, as she put it, at parish ‘dos.’

‘My dear, I really do not think you do Nell justice,’ objected gentle little Mrs Lestrangle. ‘She takes a very great interest in your work, and was most anxious to help you in any way that she could. We all sympathise with you in the heavy weight that you have taken.’

Basil's eyes grew suspiciously bright as her mother spoke of the heavy weight her work was ; but it was against her principles of loyalty to her husband to complain of her life, so she interrupted with a light laugh, and said, 'Oh, I only do what I like doing, and that is never a heavy weight. My life is very full ; but I would rather wear out than rust out any day.'

'I am afraid it is too much wear for you, Basil. Granville said he should not like his wife to work so hard.'

Mrs Paul flared up. 'Granville !' she replied scornfully. 'I should be sorry to regulate my life by the standard of such a thoroughly worldly man as Mr Granville Neville, especially after the standard I have been used to for so many years. No doubt he thinks such work as ours folly ; but'——

'My *dear* Basil,' cried her mother, much distressed, and a little shocked, 'I must have expressed myself very stupidly to have vexed you like this. As far as Granville Neville is concerned, he spoke with the greatest admiration both of you and of Peter, and of the excellent work you were doing. He seemed to have enjoyed his stay at Barton immensely ; but he did think, as we all think, that you are working too hard ; and as for being worldly, he is a man of the world, but I think that is too hard a word to be applied to him.'

Mrs Paul went over to her mother and kissed her. 'Never mind, mother dear. I did not mean to be unkind ; and Mr Neville is a very worthy man, though I should not compare him with Peter, of course. But "to return to our muttons." I do wish that worthy man had either stayed at home to look after his future wife, or taken her with him. She has improved the shining hour at Barton by turning the heads of all the young men in and about the village, and breaking the heart of one at least.'

‘I do hope you are exaggerating, Basil,’ said Mrs Lestrangle, much inclined to take up arms for her younger daughter. ‘I should be sorry to think that Nell had behaved as badly as you suggest.’

Mrs Paul shook her head. ‘As far as turning our village youths’ heads is concerned, I am not exaggerating; and one of them is certainly hopelessly in love with her. But I did not mean to insinuate anything more than that Miss Nell is a very fascinating young person, and amuses herself.’

Mrs Lestrangle looked at her still handsome daughter with fond admiration. ‘Nell fascinating! She is not, and never will be, to be compared with you.’

Mrs Paul laughed. ‘I am an old married woman; and Nell is a girl, and, as I have lately discovered, a very clever and attractive one. She is a dear girl at heart; but at present the heart is hidden.’

‘I cannot imagine any one noticing Nell while you are in the room,’ replied her mother, who had not forgotten the sensation her daughter Basilia had made when she came out; ‘but if you think Nell needs a change I will certainly take her somewhere—abroad, I suppose you mean. I wonder where she would like to go?’

Upon sounding Nell next morning, it was found that she had decided views upon the subject.

‘By all means let us go abroad,’ said Nell.

‘We might cross to Ostend or some French seaside place,’ said Mrs Lestrangle.

‘Oh, let us go farther than that!’ cried Nell. ‘Why not the Black Forest or the Tyrol?’

‘Why not Switzerland?’ suggested Basil. ‘The Robinsons are going there, and would be delighted to take you, and that would save mother being dragged half over the Continent,

and roughing it in some village inn, which you would be sure to be reduced to in the Black Forest. Besides, I could have her for some time.'

'No Switzerland for me, Mistress Basil, thank you,' observed Nell.

'Why not, you perverse mortal?'

'For why? It is too hackneyed, and the Robinsons are going: two excellent reasons for my not going.'

'I do not object to the Tyrol,' said Mrs Lestranger; 'but I cannot say I like the idea of the Black Forest. It does not sound safe somehow.'

Her daughters laughed.

'The Kilpatrick's have gone abroad this summer,' said Basil. 'Do you know where they have gone, Nell?'

'Somewhere in the south of Germany, to some lake or other.'

'That sounds inviting. Why do you not go to them? You like Mabel, and they would only be too pleased to have you.'

'Seems to me,' remarked Nell drily, 'that that is more than my own family are. However, I'll look up Mabel's last letter, and see what she says about the place.'

After some searching, Nell found the letter, which contained a glowing account of Lake Starnberg and its neighbourhood, and wound up with a wish that Nell were with them and a cordial invitation to her to join them if she could.

'I never noticed it really. I had no thought of going, and people so often say that sort of thing out of politeness.'

However, this time it turned out that this particular invitation was not given out of politeness; but was so heartily repeated when Nell suggested coming that it was decided to

pack her off to Lake Starnberg as soon as she was well enough. This was in a remarkably short time, and the middle of July saw Miss Eleanor Lestrange off to South Germany by the Dover and Ostend route.

Nell had consented to lend her mother to Basil, and had also vetoed the idea of a travelling-companion being necessary ; and Basil agreed in this view.

‘After all, mother, it is only a day and a night’s journey, and Nell is of age, and has a head on her shoulders. She can talk German like a native, not to mention having a pretty fluent English tongue in her head. So I think she may be trusted to go alone.’

Nell was much relieved when her mother at last consented. ‘I want to be alone,’ she declared. ‘I am quite as tired of everybody, as everybody must be of me.’

‘I don’t see exactly what consolation a twenty-four hours’ journey is going to be to you in your very uncongenial frame of mind ; and as for every one being tired, if you mean Peter and me, you are not the sort of person people do get tired of ; but I do not mind saying that I shall be glad to see you back your old bright, sensible self.’

‘I say, Basil,’ began Nell, leaning out of the carriage window at Victoria Station, ‘oh ! get me a paper, please.’

But this was not what Nell had meant to say, and Basil knew it ; but as she also knew the futility of trying to get anything out of her sister against that obstinate young person’s will, she merely fetched her the paper as desired, and the train went off, and left Mrs Paul standing on the platform gazing after it with a very perplexed air.

There had been a most incomprehensible expression on Nell’s face as the train steamed off, the kind of look which as a rule portended mischief.

‘She can’t get into mischief on the journey,’ soliloquised Mrs Paul; ‘and the Kilpatrick’s will keep her in order when she is in their care. She will probably have an admiring crowd of sentimental young Germans round her; but as neither Mr Neville nor we will know about it, I need not worry.’

And Mrs Paul turned to go home with an easy mind. But she was wrong. Nell’s capacity for getting into mischief was by no means so limited as her sister imagined; and if the latter could have foreseen the demonstration in that direction which Nell was to make while abroad, it is probable that she would at any inconvenience and cost have gone with her, even though it would have entailed forsaking Peter and the children, and mean no small amount of personal fatigue which she could ill have borne just then. But she did not know, so she went back to Mrs Lestrangle, and the next day the mother and daughter took their departure to Barton Vicarage in blissful ignorance of the programme which Miss Nell was then carrying out.

The first communication from her was from Ostend, where she assured them she had arrived safely after a most delightful passage across the Channel. So far so good; but she also mentioned that she was about to ‘take a look round the town.’

‘She will miss her train if she does, and lose the connection at Cologne,’ said Mrs Lestrangle anxiously.

‘Now I wonder if she meant to do that all along,’ said Mrs Paul to herself; but, aloud, she only said, ‘She can easily catch another to Brussels in time for her Cologne train.’

But next morning came another post-card still headed Ostend, in which she said she had stayed the night there, but was just off by the first train in the morning.

Mrs Lestrangle was not at all pleased at the idea of Nell in a foreign hotel by herself, and there was no explanation of the fact on the card; however, she was relieved to think that she was now safely in the train to Cologne. Her satisfaction was not of long duration; next day came another post-card, this time written from Antwerp.

‘Antwerp!’ exclaimed Mr Paul with wrinkled forehead. ‘What is she doing at Antwerp? That is not on her route at all!’

‘It may not be on the direct route to Cologne; but it is evidently on the route that impersonation of mischief has apparently mapped out for herself. As for what she is going to do, I should be sorry to prophesy it. I know what she has done, if you will excuse the slang, and that is her family.’

Mrs Lestrangle looked bewildered, and regarded the post-card vacantly.

Mr Paul looked disturbed, and said at last, ‘I think I had better go after her.’

‘You would go on a wild-goose chase then. We don’t know in the least where she is at this minute, or where she will be to-morrow; so you would simply be running after her from town to town.—What does she say, mother?’

Mrs Lestrangle read: ‘As you see, I am at Antwerp, which it seemed a pity to miss seeing when I was so near. It is a very quaint, picturesque old town. The Cathedral is noted for its beautiful carved wooden pulpit. It has’——

But Mrs Lestrangle read no more, and Nell’s graphic description of Antwerp was wasted on her family, who sat regarding each other with blank faces.

‘Do you think she had planned to do this, or is she acting on impulse?’ asked Mrs Lestrangle.

And Basil, with the memory of her sister's expression as the train was going off, had no hesitation in giving it as her opinion that Nell's route had been arranged before she left England.

'I wish I knew where she would write from next,' said Mrs Lestrangle plaintively; and Basil felt her indignation rising against her younger sister for causing her mother so much anxiety.

'I should not wonder if it were Paris,' said Mr Paul gloomily to his wife when they were alone.

'Well, if it is, you must go after her; but we will hope she will go on to Brussels now.'

The hope was not realised. The foreign post-card—Nell carefully avoided writing a letter; a post-card limited the amount of information which could be given, which was very convenient in this case—was from Bruges.

'She's back at Bruges!' observed Mr Paul with calm exasperation, as he handed the card over to his mother-in-law.

These post-cards, which read so innocently on the surface, had the effect of bombshells in the quiet west-country Vicarage, and the post came to be expected with mingled eagerness and dread.

'Is she going to visit all the towns in Belgium, do you suppose?' asked Mrs Lestrangle in despair; while her son-in-law tried to make a mental calculation as to the probable number of notable towns she would have to see, and the time it would take her.

No one cared to prophesy what Nell was or was not going to do; but Basil consoled her mother by pointing out that Nell had only taken ten pounds with her, which at all events limited her vagaries.

Mr Paul grew seriously alarmed, and was with difficulty withheld from following his erratic sister-in-law.

‘You would never catch her up, and you would not know where to go, as she carefully abstains from saying where she is going next,’ said his wife. ‘It would be a case of Evangeline, which is a story that always haunts me; and even if you were more successful than that faithful maid, what kind of a welcome do you suppose you would receive from Nell?’

Mr Paul looked depressed, but replied, ‘I can’t help the kind of welcome I might get. Anything would be better than this suspense.’

‘Suspense?’ said Mrs Paul in surprise.

‘Yes, not knowing what Nell is doing.’

‘Why, we *do* know. She is sight-seeing on the Continent.’

‘If one were sure that that were all,’ began Mr Paul, who looked the picture of dejection.

The good man was the one near male relative of the Lestranges in England. Mrs Lestrangle had three daughters (one married to an officer abroad, Mrs Paul, and Nell), and a son in the navy, at present in Chinese waters. So that Mr Paul, who was terribly shocked by Nell’s latest escapade, felt that it was his duty somehow to go and take her under his charge.

But Basil was almost angry with her husband, and said, ‘All! of course it is all. How many times must I tell you that you do not know Nell? I would sooner trust my sister Eleanor all the world over than any of the many well-brought-up and conventional young women I know. You may take my word for it that Nell is as proper and well-behaved on this tour of hers as any one could wish.’ And Mrs Paul was right in the main.

‘Well, I can only hope I am wrong, and making too much of the matter,’ said Mr Paul dubiously. ‘All the same, I shall not have a moment’s peace until I hear she is safe with the Kilpatricks; and not even then,’ he muttered under his breath.

And at that moment Nell was sitting at breakfast in a very pretty flat in one of the best streets, apparently *tête-à-tête* with a handsome, fair-haired and blue-eyed young German, to all appearances enjoying herself immensely!

Two days later brought the most satisfactory communication which had so far been received from the traveller. It ran: ‘COLOGNE STATION.—I am just off to Starnberg, *via* Munich. Shall make no further stay on my way. Will write on my arrival. Please send some money to me at the Kilpatricks.’

‘Well, that is a blessing!’ said Mr Paul with unusual vehemence. ‘As Nell is a girl of her word, I suppose we may take it that she will not get out of the train till she does reach her destination?’

‘It is indeed a blessing,’ echoed Mrs Lestrangle. ‘And as all has ended well, I suppose one must not blame the child for wishing to see a little of the world. She is very independent and enterprising, and perhaps I have kept her too much at home; but I am not quite advanced enough for the young people of the present day.’ And the gentle little woman sighed.

Mrs Paul said nothing. She had taken up the card and was reading it attentively, and having done so she laid it down without comment. As has been said, she knew Nell—at all events better than most people—and she read between the lines.

‘Something has happened to cut short her wanderings,’

was her shrewd surmise. 'There is no description of Cologne, nor does she say she is enjoying herself. Moreover, her ten pounds have gone rather quickly in six days unless she has been investing largely in lace or curios, which are not in Nell's line. I wonder what she has really been doing.'

Mrs Paul had to wait much longer than the reader to hear the true account of Nell's wanderings.

In the meanwhile peace again reigned at Barton Vicarage, and Nell's next or rather first letter written under Mrs Kilpatrick's roof, and the shelter of her wing, was all that could be desired.

'There, you see, I was right,' was Mrs Paul's inevitable remark to her husband when they had this satisfactory letter.

'All the same, I should be sorry for Rosie to do such a thing,' replied her husband, 'and I hope you will request Nell not to incite her to such New Woman ways.'

Mrs Paul laughed merrily at the idea of five-year-old Rosie needing to be protected from Nell's pernicious influence, and the matter dropped.

CHAPTER XL

THE DÉBUT OF AN EMANCIPATED WOMAN.



AND what of Nell? In speaking of this time afterwards to her sister, Nell's explanation or excuse for her conduct was that she wished to be an emancipated woman.

'I have always thought,' she observed, 'that most of the restrictions that "do hedge round a woman" are purely conventional, and that I should like to break through them all;' and she spread her arms out wide as if to brush aside these barriers of conventionality. And then she dropped them suddenly, and remarked with gravity, 'But'——

'Well?' said her sister interrogatively.

'It wasn't well,' replied Nell brusquely. 'I don't know anything about other women; but personally I don't find pretending to be equal to a man in independence——pays.'

And the following tale of Nell's wanderings will explain why.

As has been said, Nell left Victoria Station with a twinkle in her eye, and a very satisfied, not to say relieved, expression on her face. This expression broadened into a very mischievous smile as she sank back on the seat after the train had puffed out of the station.

'Free at last, thank goodness!' she murmured to herself as she pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket; and she looked

so bright and fresh that her travelling companion, a lady with her two children, smiling back at her, said, 'You are looking forward to your trip on the Continent? Perhaps it is your first?'

'Yes it is,' replied Nell, 'and I mean to enjoy it.' She proceeded to converse with her newly-made acquaintance, who knew the Continent well, and got information as to hotels and so forth. Her companions, like most of the passengers, were going straight to Brussels by the boat-train, so unfortunately Nell only had their company as far as Ostend.

Arrived at Ostend, Nell took the first hotel 'bus she saw to the hotel to which it belonged. 'I expect they're much of a muchness,' she observed to herself, meaning the hotels; 'and if they send a 'bus to meet the train they are bound to be respectable.'

Having deposited her luggage at the hotel, which happened to be one of the best, Nell secured the cheapest room she could, tidied herself, and went to take her 'look round Ostend.'

As Miss Eleanor Lestrangle was by no means a silent personage, and quite unused to solitude, she was reduced to conversing with herself, and she held highly edifying conversations with herself during this tour of emancipation.

'I suppose,' she soliloquised after she had 'looked round' and failed to find much that was worthy of interest in Ostend, 'that I *ought* really to see the gambling-place here;' and she accordingly turned her steps in the direction of the Casino.

'On second thoughts,' she remarked, as she looked at the handsome building, 'it will probably be very hot and stuffy, and the beach will be much more to the point.' Not for

worlds would Miss Nell acknowledge that maiden modesty hindered her from entering the probably crowded Casino unattended, or that principle had anything to do with her change of plan.

When seven o'clock came, and with it table d'hôte, Nell in a very pretty demi-toilet sailed down the wide staircase, and walked to the door of the dining-hall. There was a loud buzz of conversation from the various parties. Those nearest the door looked up and paused almost involuntarily as Nell, with heightened colour and complexion made delicate by her illness, stood for one moment at the door. And then——

Nell turned and fled incontinently up the wide staircase, along the long corridors, up, till she reached the shelter of her own little bedroom. 'Oh, you coward!' she cried, as she shook her finger at her image in the glass. 'You arrant coward! And I'm so hungry,' she wound up pathetically. 'I must have something brought up here. I can't starve; I shall go to bed, ring the bell, and tell the maid that I am tired, and will have some dinner in bed.'

Whatever the maid thought, she said nothing; but appeared at intervals with appetising little dishes.

Next morning Nell's bill stood: 'Bedroom, 5 fr.; déjeuner on arrival, 2 fr.; café, 1 fr.; table d'hôte, 7 fr.; attendance, 5 fr.; light, &c., 2 fr.—22 fr.'

'Off I go out of this expensive "ole,"' commented Nell, and she forthwith took train to Bruges. Here she fared better. She had been recommended to a quiet hotel, and she enjoyed the quaint town, with the beautiful churches and bridges, immensely. At the hotel she found a very friendly chambermaid, a country girl, who, happening to have an afternoon off, took her under her chaperonage, and

showed Nell much of Bruges that she would not otherwise have seen.

Nell was beginning to feel the pleasures of her untrammelled condition, and went off to Ghent with a light heart. It is not to be denied that she took malicious pleasure in sending off the pictorial post-cards which caused such consternation at home. 'Mother trusts me,' she argued to herself; 'and as for these two'—and by that she meant Mr and Mrs Paul—'if they choose to upset themselves and be shocked, they must. Peter's eyes will probably be up in his hair; and Basil—I know just what Basil will look like; but she trusts me too, really, only she's getting so proper and good. Anyhow, they can't stop me, and by the time I go home the subject will have been forgotten.'

There was one point which Miss Nell had not taken into consideration, and that was that she was far from strong. Consequently she overdid her sight-seeing, and arrived at Ghent with a desperate headache. However, she would not give way to it, and waste a day indoors; so she doggedly walked about Ghent and tried to imagine that she was enjoying herself, till about six o'clock, when nature would be outraged no longer, and she betook herself to bed. 'Well, at any rate, this has been a cheap day,' she groaned, 'for I have not eaten or spent anything.'

Her satisfaction, however, was dashed next morning by finding herself quite unable to get up.

The hotelkeeper was in a great state of mind at hearing this. The worthy man was not sure that he approved of young demoiselles wandering about like this all alone. If she had not been English, which accounts for any vagary almost in Continental eyes, he would not have thought it *convenable*; as it was, he was seriously disturbed at the possibility

of having a strange young lady ill at his hotel. Fortunately for Nell, her bright, pleasant manners had captivated the waitress here as at Bruges, and she tried to reassure the maid; but mine host insisted either that the demoiselle should see him or a doctor. As Nell knew this was only a case of fatigue and nervous headache, she preferred the former visitation as the cheaper. And the hotelkeeper, accompanied by the chambermaid, came to see her.

Nell succeeded in convincing him that she was not going to have a fever or anything, and most certainly not cholera; and perhaps a little heap of sovereigns which Nell had, with a purpose, displayed on the little table at her bedside further reassured him, British gold being a sure passport to the hotelkeeper's favour. So, after a short interview, in which he imparted to her his opinion that young demoiselles should never travel unaccompanied by their parents or husbands, mine host retired with many vows and wishes for Nell's *meilleur santé*.

And now it was that the first doubt as to the success of her tour began to assail Nell. However, a night's rest did wonders, and a bright morning raised her spirits. She declared herself recovered, and to mine host's secret relief took herself and her baggage to Antwerp with a very blurred impression of Ghent as a town, but a very pleasant one of the kindness of Ghent servants. Nell had learned wisdom by bitter experience, and decided not to overdo Antwerp; so she took a fiacre and leisurely did the town the first morning, and in the afternoon went for a walk to find a certain museum. It was a pleasant day, and the quaint streets exercised a fascination over Nell, so she wandered in and out of the oldest and poorest part of Antwerp, consoling herself by the thought that if she had no bump of locality she

had at least a-French tongue in her head, and could ask her way back to the Cathedral, near which she was staying. But here Nell counted without her host. When she grew tired, and wished to get back, she accosted the first child she met, and was greeted by a torrent of unintelligible language and much gesticulation. Her next essay was no more successful. The children in this part evidently knew no French; and, as Nell knew no Flemish, she might, as she remarked to herself, just as well have been born deaf and dumb. A woman to whom she now addressed herself was just as ignorant, as Nell indignantly thought, and she began whimsically to imagine herself wandering all day about these dirty, smelly streets in a kind of circle, seeking in vain for an outlet.

But Nell's smile worked on the woman's intelligence, and with an answering smile and much pantomimic performance she took Nell by the hand and led her along a side street dirtier and narrower than the others. For one moment Nell's heart failed her; visions of being kidnapped or murdered, for her clothes perhaps, flitted across her mind's eye; but she dismissed them, and her love of adventure carried her through. Through a dark archway, down a narrow court, the woman went with Nell in tow, and into a dark room, as it seemed to Nell—where two men sat and worked either at some leather work or shoemaking: Nell was not clear about this, but knew there was a strong smell of leather—and here the woman released Nell and began declaiming. One of the men, a pleasant-faced man, with swarthy features, immediately got up, said something to the woman, and turning to Nell with the bow of a prince, said in very fair French, 'Mademoiselle wishes to know something? She has probably lost her way?'

Nell, with thankfulness, told him that this was the case;

and the Frenchman, or rather Belgian, fetched his cap, and with another courtly bow held the door for her, and expressed his readiness to show her the way back to the Cathedral.

Nell was profoundly thankful to see the spire of the Antwerp Cathedral before her, and offered her kindly guide a franc ; but he politely but firmly declined to take it, saying it had been a pleasure. When Nell tried to insist, the man, taking his hat off, told her to give it to the saint something (Nell's Protestant ignorance prevented her from catching the name) who helps lost wanderers, and parted from her. Nell went up the Cathedral steps and dropped her franc into an alms-box labelled 'For the Poor,' and rested awhile, feasting her eyes upon the beautiful carved pulpit, the description of which was so coldly received at Barton Vicarage.

At the hotel where Nell was staying were two very friendly Scotch ladies, who fraternised and dined with Nell, and at ten o'clock they all went to bed, Nell only two doors off them in the same corridor.

Ever since the influenza, Nell had been troubled by uncomfortable dreams, and this night she woke out of one with a most uncanny feeling. As she lay awake, every nerve tingling, she heard the handle of her door turn. Like a flash Nell remembered that she had been so tired that she had forgotten to lock it. She had not believed in the saying that one's hair stood on end with fright ; but she thought in that moment that, if she could see it, her hair must be performing this act, and each separate hair seemed to bristle. The door opened, and by the dim reflected light of a street lamp Nell saw a man's head cautiously inserted. Nell neither moved nor breathed. The man came in. Nell, with the instinct of self-preservation, closed her eyes as he crept up to the

bed. Seeing her, as he thought, asleep, he went to the toilet-table and took from it her gold watch and a diamond brooch which Granville Neville had given her. At this juncture, Nell, knowing the steps had left her bedside, opened her eyes and saw the thief in the act of pocketing some things—she guessed what they were—and made a sudden slight movement, meaning to ring the bell. Slight as it was, the thief heard it, and turning swiftly left the room, closing the door after him. With one bound Nell was at the door and locked it; then, with trembling hands she struck a light, and candle in hand, went to the looking-glass and looked at herself. ‘Not a hair turned,’ was her quaint remark. ‘I thought it would have turned white in a single night, as others have done with sorrow.’ And then, with the light still burning, Nell crept back to bed, her teeth chattering, and in her own words, ‘considered the situation.’

Now, whatever Nell might call herself, she was not really a coward; and though she was very frightened, and naturally so, at the moment, she soon recovered herself, and with a lock and lighted candle between her and further intrusion, she could think the matter over with a commendable amount of self-possession.

‘Bang goes my lovely brooch, I am afraid. Granville will be vexed, especially when he knows how it has gone—to say nothing of my watch. It was that waiter with that squint who waited on us at dinner; he never took his eyes off my brooch, I noticed. It’s a mercy I do not take off my rings at night. The point is, shall I make a row about them or not? The best plan will be to go and ask the man about them in the morning. I shall just walk up to him and say, “Monsieur”—I believe they say monsieur to every one here; anyway it may soften his heart—“please give me back my

brooch and watch, or—police.” Whereupon he will fall at my feet, give up his spoils, and entreat my forgiveness.’

And having made up this graphic and touching—not to say highly satisfactory—scene, Nell wrapped a shawl round her shoulders; and, knowing that sleep was out of the question, sat up in bed and began to read. The Cathedral chimes struck four, and Nell hailed the approaching dawn with relief.

Next morning at about eight o’clock she went down and asked for the waiter who had waited on them the evening before. The head-waiter looked embarrassed, and said he was out. On Nell’s persisting, he said he had gone home, left, in fact. From a chambermaid Nell heard, under vow of secrecy, that he had disappeared with the cash-box and other articles of value. So Nell’s scene did not come off, and her dislike to unpleasantness decided her to bear her loss in silence.

By this time Miss Lestrangle felt that she had had enough of Antwerp; therefore she took leave of her new acquaintances without telling them of her loss, and went off to the station. ‘Well, there are only two valuables I can lose now,’ thought Nell, ‘my purse and my ring; and as I keep the one always on my finger, and the other in my pocket, except when I am paying out money, I think they are pretty safe, thank goodness!’

‘I do hope,’ was her final comment on Antwerp, ‘that all the Belgian towns are not “streeted” with cobbles. The way this fly—or whatever they call this vehicle—jolts and jumps along is death to the nerves of one’s spine;’ and Nell sat bolt upright in her vehicle in the vain hope that by so doing she might feel less jarred.

As a matter of fact her hope was not realised, for the

streets of Mechlin and Brussels were just as 'cobbly' and uncomfortable to traverse, whether on foot or driving, as Antwerp, which probably accounts for the practice the peasants have of wearing wooden sabots, in which they clatter along the streets.

CHAPTER XII.

A PAUPER ABROAD.



It had been said of Nell, probably by her sister Basil, that she generally arrived from a journey with an umbrella as sole luggage. This was really not far from the truth, partly because Nell would take no handbags or baggage, but confined her luggage to one box if possible, so that she carried no 'hand luggage,' as she called it, and partly because she never troubled her head to look after what luggage she did take, once she had seen it labelled. She contended that it was the business of the Company to see that it arrived at its destination once she had put it in the Company's care, and that travelling was quite bad enough without agitating yourself and living with your head and part of your body well out of the carriage window at every station craning your neck to see if that portmanteau which is the very image of yours, is being feloniously carried off by some one else. As a result, Nell's luggage rarely, if ever, arrived with her; and long use had made her philosophical on the subject. So far, her philosophy had been justified by circumstances: her luggage had turned up sooner or later, as she said; and as she was not too proud to borrow the needful from her long-suffering friends and relations, she was not as much inconvenienced by the delay as most women, or even as the aforesaid friends and relations.

Consequently, the Continental custom of registering one's luggage through to one's destination found favour in Nell's eyes. On this occasion it was especially convenient. She took tickets to Brussels both for herself and her portmanteau, a large-sized Gladstone, meaning the latter to go on direct to Brussels, while she herself got out at Mechlin, where she purposed spending some hours. So far so good. The portmanteau duly arrived at Brussels by about eleven o'clock; and, having no apparent owner, was put into the cloak-room with hundreds of other boxes, bags, and portmanteaus, while Miss Nell descended at Mechlin and revelled in the picturesque mediæval town, and bought lace.

The morning flew by, and Nell found she had no time to get a proper lunch if she were to catch the two-thirty train to Brussels; so, hastily purchasing some kind of cake which she didn't much like the look of, and still less the taste of, Nell made for the station and just caught the train.

'Just in time to see the picture galleries to-day,' muttered Nell, who was by this time bitten with the sight-seeing mania that attacks most travellers, and to which English people abroad seem specially prone to fall victims; 'that is to say if I don't stop to see about that bothering portmanteau, so I shall just leave it until the galleries close, and then come back and fetch it to the hotel.'

Having disposed of her responsibility towards her luggage, Nell made her way to the Old Masters' Gallery. In one hand was the inevitable Baedeker, in the other an umbrella—the latter she deposited with the man at the counter near the door, and received a round ticket for it. Nell always maintained that beautiful pictures and scenery gave her an ache; but in spite of this asseveration she stood for at least ten minutes in front of Quentin Massys' 'Holy Family,' and

would have stood longer but for the rudeness of a common-looking Belgian, who first stood close to her, and then brushed rather roughly past her. Nell felt ruffled, and walked on. After about an hour the ache, of which Miss Lestrangle was most acutely conscious was the pang of hunger, attacked her, and not even her favourite picture, the Sistine Madonna, would have kept her in that gallery had it been there, so she turned to go out. As she approached the door she put her hand in her pocket to get out her umbrella-ticket, which she had placed in her purse for safety. Alas! no purse was there. Nell gasped. Back up the staircase she flew, and through every room in which she had gone, interrogating on her way the various commissionaires at the doors—but no sign of the purse; and even as she hurried on the futility of the quest struck her. It was that rude man, she knew; but still she searched, in reality to stave off the moment when she must face the fact that she was alone in a foreign town, absolutely penniless—twelve hours from home and fourteen from her destination.

But at last the dreadful fact had to be faced, and Nell went down to the custodians of the umbrellas and told them her tale of woe. The man and his wife were most sympathetic. Nell's white and miserable face bore witness to the truth of her tale, and the couple invited her to sit down and take a little water while they searched for her umbrella, which was fortunately easily distinguishable, for it was gold-topped and had her monogram 'E.L.' engraved on it. While the man looked for it, the woman questioned Nell, who in a sudden panic felt for her book of tickets. This at first she could not find, and then she remembered it was in her Baedeker, on which the good-natured Belgian advised her to congratulate herself.

But Nell had no heart for self-congratulation in her present predicament; however, she took their advice, and went off to the police-station. In a few moments she heard some one running after her, and the friendly attendant, in her pretty white-frilled cap, came up saying: 'Pardon, mademoiselle, but I will come with you and show you the way.'

Afterwards, when Nell was asked what a Belgian police-station was like, she said truthfully, 'I haven't the slightest idea. I only know that I was put on a bench with about half-a-dozen of the most unattractive-looking creatures I ever saw. Owing to my mistaking what was said to me—they said something about *êtes vous appelé?* and I gave my name; and it appears they were asking me if I were summoned, or whatever they call it there—I had the greatest difficulty in getting attention or civility out of them.' But Nell could not, after the first time, be got to talk at all of this particular adventure, and allusions to it, either jocular or serious, were taken amiss.

Meanwhile she left the police-station, where she received no comfort or sympathy; the officials doubtless thinking that young ladies who insisted on travelling about foreign countries unchaperoned must expect, and certainly deserve, to get into trouble. Her first thought was the English Ambassador, and to the English Embassy she wended her weary way, being now past hunger. It seemed such a long way, and Nell had not a penny for a tram, which would have taken her within a few steps of it. Trouble dogged her steps. The Ambassador was in England for a few days, and had only left unsympathetic Belgian servants in possession. The porter suggested the English Consul. Feeling ready to drop, Nell dragged herself to the Consulate, only to hear

that that gentleman was at Spa, drinking the waters presumably.

Nell saw green trees and a seat near, and made for them. It was the pretty little park of Brussels, and here she sat and cried from sheer weakness and misery.

At last a peasant woman who had been watching her accosted her with 'Mademoiselle is in trouble?' Nell turned her pale face and red-rimmed eyes to the woman, and told her tale. The woman was voluble in her expressions of sympathy; and, having heard her whole tale, and vituperated the villainy of the thief, for Nell was now sure it was the rude man who had jostled her while she was gazing at Quentin Massys' 'Holy Family,' she suggested that mademoiselle should go to a priest, an English priest—surely there was one in Brussels?

Nell brightened up. Not that she meant to go to a priest; but she remembered the English chaplain. Of course he would help her, and she looked him up in her Baedeker. The peasant woman knew the street quite well, and offered to escort Nell; and in spite of the fact that she was laden with a large basket, evidently heavy, whatever its contents, she trudged by Nell's side in what was quite an opposite direction to her own, and only left her at the door with an assurance that she would pray to St Anthony for the recovery of the purse. Nell smiled as she thanked her, but the peasant's simple faith shamed her somehow.

When the door of the chaplain's house was opened, and the maid told Nell he was out, she felt that her cup was indeed full; and she was debating within herself whether she should collapse on the doorstep or turn away in despair, when a lady who came to the door at the moment said, 'I am the chaplain's wife; can I be of any service to you?'

and then she took Nell into her pretty English-looking drawing-room. It had not, until this moment, struck Nell that she was simply there to beg, and the unpleasantness of the situation was great. Nell had a vivid recollection of the curt way in which she had dismissed a well-dressed impostor who had found her way into their London drawing-room on a similar errand. Mrs Blank, however, was kindness itself; and gave Nell the five francs for which she stammeringly asked. 'But, my dear Miss Lestrangle, I am sure that is not enough,' said Mrs Blank.

'Oh yes,' said Nell hastily. 'I shall get there to-morrow night, and I shall only want food on the way.' Begging was really very unpleasant, and she remained firm in her refusal to take more.

Truly Nell's evil star was in the ascendant to-day, for her troubles were not yet over. Mrs Blank offered to make inquiries about the purse, and gave Nell a sheet of paper to write her address on.

Nell, in sheer absence of mind, took up a large flat book to rest her paper on. The address written, Mrs Blank told her there was a train for Cologne in about an hour. So Nell, with heartfelt thanks, took her leave, found a tram for the station, and got into it.

'I could not walk another step if I were paid for it,' murmured Nell, so she literally dropped on to a seat in the jolting tram, and her head sank on her breast. By this movement she caught sight of what she was grasping tightly in her hand. It was a long, handsomely bound flat book. Nell opened it. It was excellent reproductions of pictures. On the front page was written: 'Presented to the Reverend Blank by the Members of his Confirmation Class,' &c.

'Oh! well, I am done for now,' said Nell. 'When Mr

Thing-ma-gig comes home, and his wife tells him the tale, he will at once say, "An impostor," and look round to see if anything has been stolen, and will at once miss this book. Now, the point is, what's to be done? It means a day's delay if I go back and miss my train, and in my present penurious condition the sooner I get to the Kilpatrick's the better. The only thing is to burn my boats, and hope that Mr Blank will not return home till I am in my train and well out of this hole.' Thus unjustly did Nell designate Brussels. But for the present she had arrived at the station, and the account she gave of the rest of her journey is best given in her own words to Mabel Kilpatrick.

'My dear,' said she, 'do you know what a thief's feelings are?'

Mabel Kilpatrick professed her ignorance.

'Well, I do! They are most uncomfortable. First of all, you want to fly to the uttermost parts of the earth; at least that's what I wanted to do when I got to the station at Brussels; and when I found I had just missed the train, and there was no other till midnight, I felt I must slink into some dark and remote corner; but there was worse. So I bethought me of my luggage, and went to get it out. However, the clerk in charge of the cloak-room, having listened stolidly to my tale of woe, declared his inability to hand over my portmanteau without a ticket. "How can I help my ticket being lost?" I asked him. He shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands, which did not help much. Then he asked for my passport, and of course I had none. Moral: Never stir out of England without a passport; it is not safe. Then I asked what other people did who found themselves in a similar dilemma. Apparently Belgians are too well conducted to get into such fixes; but English people, he

explained, went to the English Ambassador, which meant some days' delay.'

'Nell,' remarked Mabel Kilpatrick, 'I should simply have collapsed. I could never have gone through such a lot of discomfort.'

'You never know what you can do till you try,' replied Nell with an air of wisdom, 'especially when it means recovering what is for the nonce your entire wardrobe. Anyway, I went off to the stationmaster, and after much trouble returned triumphant with a slip of paper with the words, "Permit bearer to enter the cloak-room and identify and remove her luggage," signed by the name of the stationmaster.'

'What a blessing! You must have been thankful!' ejaculated Mabel.

'The worst had yet to come,' said Nell, waxing gloomy with the remembrance. 'The cloak-room clerk was surprised and not over-pleased at the ease with which I had obtained leave to invade his sanctum; however, he reluctantly admitted me. Now, how many English people, do you suppose, travel with large brown Gladstones?'

'A great many, I know; but you had your name on your label, of course?'

'Why "of course?"' asked Nell testily. 'As it happens, I had no label, and consequently no name, so I looked round on all those portmanteaus quite bewildered, while the clerk eyed me suspiciously. At last I saw a portmanteau looking just like mine, and with the labels of two towns I had been to lately, so I thought I had found it at last. The clerk opened it for my inspection. Mabel,' said Nell in tragic tones, 'it was a man's portmanteau, with men's shirts on one side, and a man's cycling suit on the other. The man

stood there looking from the portmanteau to me. "These are mademoiselle's?" he asked me. I waived the portmanteau aside. "Pas à moi," I said airily, and walked on. The man had visions of an evening spent in examining other people's portmanteaus for my pleasure, and so had I. However, I saw a portmanteau like mine with "Barton" on it, and I made for it.'

'Was it yours?' asked Mabel.

'It was, thank goodness! But it's an idiotic custom registering your luggage. I'm for the old English haphazard way. Oh, then, you know, I felt hungry, so I went and had the cheapest meal I could think of—cheap and nasty!'

Mabel laughed. 'Of what did it consist?'

'Bread, native cheese (I don't know what they call it, but the chief ingredient seems to be soap), and *bock*, a native drink for which one has to acquire a taste. It came to the large amount of sevenpence.'

'What a meal, my dear Eleanor! How could you sit at a public restaurant and eat bread and cheese—and alone, too?' said Mrs Kilpatrick.

'You can do a great deal when you are starving,' replied Nell, nodding her head.

'Why did you not have coffee and bread and butter? It would have been more suitable for afternoon tea for a young lady. But I believe you like doing out-of-the-way things.'

CHAPTER XIII.

VALE, EMANCIPATION !



NOTHING made Nell crosser than to be accused of eccentricity ; but with the delightful inconsistency of her sex this did not prevent her doing and saying the most unconventional things. All that she really desired was to get as much fun as possible out of life. The New Woman and the real Bohemian were most uncongenial to her ; and at heart Eleanor Lestrangle was as much a slave to the traditions of her class and upbringing as—more so, perhaps, than—her sister Mrs Paul. Moreover, the reaction after the experiences of the past week had put her out of conceit with emancipation for women ; at any rate she said to herself, with solemn shakes of her head, ‘It is not for me.’

Naturally this remark of Mrs Kilpatrick’s made her very indignant.

‘Like doing out-of-the-way things indeed, Mrs Kilpatrick ! There is not much to like in losing your purse and being stranded in a pauper condition in a foreign land. It is simply a chapter of accidents which I am telling you about.’ It was convenient to Nell to ignore the fact that her being sight-seeing alone in these ‘foreign parts’ was by no means an accident. ‘And as for *bock* and cheese not being as suitable a meal as coffee and bread and butter, allow me to remark that it was not a case of ladylike afternoon tea, but a case of

what was the most filling at the price. Oh, I dare say it sounds vulgar,' as Mrs Kilpatrick's face expressed lively disapproval; 'the truth has a way of being vulgar; but you see I had to support life for twenty-four hours or more and travel some hundreds of miles on four shillings. So I remembered how at home the British workman sits and eats large chunks of cheese for his dinner to help him through his arduous labours, and followed suit.'

'I should not take the British workman as a model of a hard-working member of society,' observed Mr Kilpatrick; 'besides which, to be accurate, that gentleman supports his lazy body on chops and steaks, which he cooks, mixed with onions, in a frying-pan. At least, that is what those beggars who were upheaving our street did all this summer just outside our dining-room. Positively smelt us out of town.'

'Well, that simply bears out my statement,' replied Nell. 'While the British workman ate large chunks of cheese he worked well; now that he eats indigestible steaks he idles his time away.'

'Never mind about the British workman,' put in Mabel Kilpatrick; 'the only good thing I ever knew him to do was to make papa leave town a month earlier to escape his onions. I want to know what you did after you had eaten up your bread and cheese?'

'I never got as far as that; that is the tragic part of it,' said Nell in solemn tones. 'The most awful thing of all happened now.'

Mr Kilpatrick laughed. 'Pile it on, Nell. You will have given Mabel table-talk for months before you have finished.' For Mabel Kilpatrick always went the round of the house before a dinner-party, asking for topics of conversation.

'It is a great deal too serious for that. If I thought Mabel were going to make capital of my sufferings I would never'——

'Oh, but I will not,' Mabel assured her.

'Well, it was dreadful. As I was sitting there, with a piece of cheese poised on a knife in one hand and my glass of *bock* in the other'——

'Well, that's unrefined, but not awful.'

Nell went on without heeding the interruption: 'The door of the restaurant swung open, and in walked the British chaplain at Brussels.'

'How did you know he was the British chaplain?' demanded Mabel, who was nothing if not matter-of-fact.

'Oh, I knew him in a moment, because he was unmistakably a clergyman of the Church of England; and every one knew him.'

'And did you return him the book?'

Nell stared at her. 'No, that never occurred to me. I just dropped cheese, knife, *bock*, and all, and fled from the room. I looked round wildly for a place of refuge in vain; then I had a brilliant inspiration—I went to a good-natured waitress, told her I was so sleepy, and asked if there was any place where I could lie down until my train went. She took me into a room belonging to the barmaids, and there I lay on a sofa with a handkerchief over my face (in the improbable case of the chaplain coming to look for me there), and not an inch did I budge until the midnight train came in.'

'Well, really, Nell, I should not have suspected you of such folly. Why on earth did you not go to speak to Mr Blank? He had probably never missed the book at all, but had come to see if he could be of any assistance to you.'

'Well, yes; I know now that that was precisely what he

had come to the station for ; but one never thinks of those things at the time. Anyway, I did not think of them, as I lay low, both literally and figuratively, till I got into the train for Cologne. And then—what do you think ?—I had bought some costume dolls for Rosie, and when we arrived at the German frontier those horrid Custom-House creatures made me pay toll.’

‘Of course, there is a duty on all articles of foreign manufacture,’ remarked Mr Kilpatrick. ‘Quite right too. Wish we’d got it at home ; keep those German beggars out.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Nell in parenthesis. ‘But as these particular dolls were made in Germany, I fail to see what right they had to tax them from coming to stay a few weeks in their native land. However, I talked to the officials until I was black in the face, or felt so ; but they were obdurate ; so I asked how much I had to pay ; and, “orrers upon orrer’s ’e’d,” as the Area Belle says, it was three shillings and sixpence and I had only three shillings and twopence.’

‘Poor Nell !’ ejaculated Mrs Kilpatrick.

‘Yes,’ echoed Nell, ‘it was poor Nell indeed. There was I in that horrid long *douane* keeping the whole train waiting, and those hard-hearted officials standing staring coldly at me.’

‘Well,’ cried Mabel Kilpatrick, ‘do go on. What did you do ?’

‘I did nothing. I stood and stared coldly back at them, and I should be standing staring coldly at them now, but a young man who had travelled from Brussels in the same carriage with me stepped forward, and, with a sweeping bow and flourish of his hat, said, “Allow me, mademoiselle ;” then to the Custom-House man, “The lady has no change,” paid the fourpence, and ordered the porter to fasten up my portmant’au and take it to the train. Then, turning to me,

said, "Here is my card ; pray, allow me to be of that small service."

'My dear,' expostulated Mrs Kilpatrick, 'I do not think you ought to have accepted a strange young man's money.'

'In that case, Mrs Kilpatrick, I should probably be in that *douane* at this minute, for none of those officials showed any signs of stirring from their posts till they had extorted their pound of flesh from poor me.'

'I hope, at any rate, that you saw no more of him,' said Mrs Kilpatrick. A quiet smile flitted across Nell's face. 'Were there no lady travellers in your carriage?'

'There were,' said Nell, with grim emphasis. 'Two wretches. Wait till I tell you about them. When we got into the carriage, I, finding that the young man could talk English, thanked him in my own tongue for having come to the rescue, and told him all my Brussels experiences. And—would you believe it?—those two ladies, whom I took to be foreigners, Frenchwomen (they were talking French as fast as possible), sat there as if they did not understand a word, and they turned out to be English. And they never offered to help me or anything, though I nearly cried, and Herr Fischer had to console me. But I had my revenge.'

'Oh, Nell, how?'

Nell's eyes twinkled. 'When we came to Cologne they found they had lost all their luggage, and what a fuss they made about it. They had left it at the frontier by mistake, and there they were, stranded in Cologne without a change of clothing ; and, to crown all, their letters of credit were in their boxes, and they had no ready-money beyond a few shillings. It was a judgment on them, in my opinion,' wound up Nell seriously. 'Whereas, I had my friend, who took me to his flat in Cologne.'

‘Eleanor!’ cried Mrs Kilpatrick, and this was a sign of great disapprobation with her. ‘You never went, I hope?’

‘Didn’t I?’ said Nell. ‘I did though, and his mother, who is the dearest old lady in the world, petted me, and fed me, and kissed me when she heard the tale; and said Carl had done quite right, and I must stay there the night; and so I did, and—here I am.’

‘Thank goodness!’ said the three Kilpatricks with such unanimity that Nell laughed.

‘Meanwhile,’ she continued, ‘if you will kindly lend me fourpence, some one, I will write and send it to—Carl.’

‘And I should hope you have had enough of travelling all over the Continent alone,’ said Mr Kilpatrick.

‘I have,’ admitted Nell. ‘I disenjoyed myself very much. Emancipation of woman is an illusion and a snare. Men have the best of it in this world, and they mean to keep it. The only way to get a good time is to do it through them. I mean to.’ And with this enigmatical, not to say ungrammatical observation, Miss Eleanor Lestrangle changed the conversation, and said, ‘And now let us enjoy ourselves. What is the thing to do—boat, bathe, or bicycle?’

‘You can bathe if you like,’ said Mabel dubiously; ‘but I do not know whether you will like it. What kind of a bath would you like?’

‘What kind?’ echoed Nell. ‘Why, how many kinds of baths are there?’

‘There are sulphur baths, or fir-pine baths, or iron-baths.’

Nell waved her hand impatiently. ‘I am not talking about baths, invalid or otherwise. I am talking about bathing in the sea—lake, I mean, of course.’

‘Well, that is just the one kind of bath you can’t have here; but you can boat if you like; and there are lovely

excursions one can make in the neighbourhood, only it is rather too hilly for a bicycle.'

And so Nell's week of freedom ended; and Mrs Kilpatrick, who, fond as she was of Nell, had had slight qualms about chaperoning her after hearing of her escapades in Belgium, was relieved to find that her charge had no desire to run into any kind of mischief.

The party spent some weeks very quietly and happily by the little Bavarian lake, doing the usual things, and enjoying the scenery round. Mrs Kilpatrick used occasionally to be puzzled by Nell, whom she thought was either not well or not happy; but as none of them knew of Nell's engagement they had no clue to her fits of depression.

One morning, Mabel, who kept a diary, remarked at breakfast, 'It is seven weeks since we left England.'

She was not prepared for the brilliant illumination of Nell's countenance.

'Is it really?' the latter said. 'You don't really mean it! How time has flown! Well, I am thankful!'

No one understood this speech. Of course, the girl was thinking of the first seven weeks of her *fiancé's* absence, and of the weary way in which they crawled along, and she was delighted to find that they could go quicker.

Four and a half months had gone. 'That only leaves seven and a half,' she calculated. And then she sighed. Seven and a half months were a long time; so much might happen in seven and a half months—in India, especially in this case, when duty took one into such unhealthy and even dangerous places. And there was the long winter coming, and winter days always seemed much longer than summer ones, paradoxical as it may sound.

It is said that absence makes the heart grow fonder; in

Nell's case the saying seemed to be true. Every letter she received brought her *fiancé* nearer to her.

It is never easy to see why two human beings choose each other out of the whole world to be all in all to each other. To the outsider nine times out of ten there is no visible reason. On the contrary, there generally appears to be every reason why these two particular people should not have chosen each other, but should have chosen some other person much more suitable in every way—in the eyes of the afore-said outsider. If would-be wooers had to be assigned by public opinion, not one in a thousand would be paired with the girl of his choice. Whether the world would be unhappier in this improbable state of affairs is a matter of doubt.

But Eleanor Lestrangle would have been the last to subscribe to this heretical doctrine. Not nine people out of ten marry their first love ; and most are as happy, so they declare, with their second. Not so Nell. She had met her fate, and neither then nor thereafter did the thought of any other man as a possible husband enter her head. She was one of those women, and they are rarer than most people imagine, who would never love again. Whether the man were worthy or not made no difference. Whether he lived or died, he lived for Nell.

'I love him,' she said simply to Basil in one of her rare bursts of confidence, 'and you can't love twice. At least I can't.'

But in this case there was no question of the worthiness of Nell's choice. Mr Granville Neville was working steadily for his country in India, and winning golden opinions from officials and natives alike ; and wherever he was, or however busy he was, he always managed to send a weekly letter to

Nell ; and he assured her that he had her image always before his eyes, and counted the days until his return fully as eagerly as she did.

Whether this statement were as perfectly accurate may be doubted ; but at any rate it was made in perfect good faith. And so far everything was going as merrily as a marriage-bell, and no more solemn sound was heard mingling with the chimes.

But the clouds were gathering for all that ; and on this morning, as the Starnberger party sat at breakfast congratulating themselves on the pleasant passing of time, and just as Nell had realised with such glee that she had lived through seven weeks which had not seemed abnormally long, the first warning of the storm was given when the post-boy brought a cable from England for Nell :

‘Come home. Basil has a little son. Dangerously ill.’

CHAPTER XIV.

A HURRIED HOME-COMING.



THE telegram dropped from Nell's hands, and she looked hopelessly round on the other three.

'I must go home at once,' she said at last with white lips. 'When—how long is it till the train goes?'

'My dear, what is it? Let me read your telegram—may I?' And as Nell picked it up and handed it to her, Mrs Kilpatrick read it with a grave face.

'I can't understand it,' said Nell piteously. 'Who is ill? Is it Basil or the little boy?'

Mrs Kilpatrick had not much doubt in her own mind as to which one the message referred to; but she only said: 'It is impossible to tell from this message; but one thing is clear: you are wanted at home, and Tom must go and see about the trains and a carriage to take you to the station. You will be able to catch the afternoon through train at Munich. Tom will, of course, go with you.'

'Oh, please not,' cried Nell. 'I shall get on quite well this time—I shall indeed,' as she saw incredulity on the faces of the Kilpatrick family. 'I shall not leave the train for a moment except to change carriages, and I would rather be alone.'

But Mrs Kilpatrick, though she did not doubt this state-

ment of Nell's, was quite determined to deposit her charge safely in her mother's house; and she finally determined that they should all return together. It was only advancing the date of their return by a short time, and they felt that none of them could enjoy themselves when Nell was in trouble. Besides which, as Mabel pointed out to her friend, the weather was becoming cold and unsettled, and they were really quite ready for a flight homewards.

Finally, Mr Kilpatrick felt convinced that the road was, or ought to be, finished by now; and if it were not, it was high time that he returned to expostulate about it.

The day was spent in packing and in futile conjectures as to the exact meaning of the cable, and guesses as to the state of affairs at Barton Vicarage.

Times without number, Nell took the flimsy paper with its curt message out of her pocket, and read it in the vain hope of reading a better meaning into the words.

'If they had only spent a few more shillings in making it clearer,' she complained. 'Why do people think it necessary to write the smallest possible number of words in an important telegram? And there is no time to telegraph and get an answer before we start.'

Her friends tried their best to impart to Nell a hope which they themselves did not entertain. Mrs Kilpatrick had inveighed strongly against the way the Pauls were working, according to the account Nell gave of life at Barton Vicarage; and she now considered that the effects of that overwork was being felt.

'It is just what I said, Tom,' she declared to her husband when they were alone, and there was noticeable in her words, even with her sincere sorrow and sympathy, a touch of satisfaction that she had proved a true prophetess. 'I told

you she had no business to be undertaking all that parish work. Those two may be doing a great deal of good, but you will see it will kill them, for Mrs Paul, I hear, is looking very thin and ill. I have no patience with people who set themselves up as better than others, and try and live impossible lives of goodness, and just kill themselves and leave all the bad ones alive.'

'Come, come, Mary,' expostulated her husband, 'that is too strong language. As things are, you would not have a parson or his wife neglect their work? For my part I feel more respect for a man like Paul, who does work hard, than for some country parsons who seem to jog along living the lives of pauper country gentlemen, seeming to think they have done their duty if they get into their pulpits once a week, and preach prosy sermons.'

'I am not speaking of the men. They are a worthy body enough. I am speaking of their wives. The wife of a lawyer or doctor is not expected to do half her husband's professional work, and why should a clergyman's?'

'I had no idea you had such strong views on the subject. You had better start a society for promoting a celibate clergy. There is a good deal to be said in its favour, especially in the present state of the livings of the Church; only, I am afraid your sex will be against you.'

'Well, it is an odd thing that some of the best-worked parishes have unmarried vicars. Look at our own for instance.'

Mr Kilpatrick laughed as he left the room. 'Very well, I shall expect to see you presiding at a public meeting for the abolition of a married clergy; only don't ask me to make myself so unpopular.'

But Mrs Kilpatrick did not laugh. She was thinking of

Basilia Paul as she was in her youth and beauty, when she first 'came out,' and she, like Nell, was inclined to think of the pity it was that she should have been wasted in a little country village.

In the little country village an entire population was praying, consciously or unconsciously, that a life so valuable and dear to them should be spared.

What is a wasted life?

All this time Nell was pacing the road between the villa and the post-office, with some kind of hope that there might be a second cable; but none came, and in the early afternoon the party took the train for Munich, *en route* for England.

'I think I shall always hate the Rhine,' Nell said to Mabel Kilpatrick. 'Last time I came up it I was in a state of collapse, not having recovered from the loss of my purse; and this time I am in a hurry to get home. These old castles seem never-ending, and the train crawls along.'

'Yes, and they may or may not be old, by the way. Some one told me that half of them were new ones, built in imitation of the real old castles, so that it is rather a fraud.'

'Yes, the Rhine is certainly a very overrated river. I prefer the Thames myself.'

Nell was trying to make conversation and put aside her anxiety, so as not to spoil the pleasure of her companions more than was inevitable; and Mabel fell in with her mood, though this her first view of the Rhine gave her great pleasure.

Cologne was reached at last, and Nell, accompanied by Mrs Kilpatrick, called upon Mrs Fischer, to whom Nell had brought some memento of the mountains, and which she would not let her trouble prevent her delivering in person. Then Brussels; but the book, with a very beautiful photo-

graph, had been returned long ago, and Nell felt no desire to see Brussels again at present. At last, on a dull September morning, they reached London, where they found reassuring letters. Basilia Paul was out of danger, but very far from strong; and the boy was a beauty; and Nell was to come down to Barton Vicarage as soon as she had had a night's rest.

But Nell persisted that she wanted no rest; and after a hasty breakfast she took the first train to Barton, where she walked into the dining-room at luncheon-time quite unexpectedly.

'History repeats itself' was the remark with which she greeted her relatives as she opened the dining-room door, where Mr Paul, his mother-in-law, and the two children sat at lunch.

'Nell! Auntie Nell!' they cried in chorus.

'Yes,' said Nell, as she seated herself. 'What's left of me, that is to say. And Basil?'

'Better, thank God!' said Mr Paul reverently. 'She will pull through now; but you must be very quiet, Nell.'

'Thank you; any further directions to give? I suppose I had better have lunch before I go up to Basil. If you are hard up, Peter, you may draw on me for a few shillings when you want to send an important cable. That one of yours left us in blissful ignorance as to who was ill.'

'Did it?' said her brother-in-law meekly. 'I am very sorry; but you must put that down to anxiety, not to parsimony. You must stay for the christening. We want you to be godmother.'

Nell felt highly honoured, and expressed herself to that effect; and immediately after lunch went up to see Basil and her boy.

Mrs Paul looked so pretty, Nell thought, and the baby she acknowledged to herself was exceptionally good-looking.

‘This child,’ she said, ‘is less like a monkey than most.’

‘For shame, Nell!’ cried Mrs Paul indignantly; ‘and—what on earth are you doing to my child?’ For Nell, who was bending over her little nephew, was lifting the little infant from its cradle by its hands, which were clasped round her fingers.

‘There! isn’t it wonderful?’ cried Nell, as she raised the baby some inches above its cot and then laid it down. ‘That’s the most remarkable proof of the Darwinian theory. No young monkey could cling’——

But here Mrs Paul made a grab at her infant, and said, highly offended, ‘I’ll thank you not to try your heathenish theories on my child.—She’s a perfect brute, babsy. You are not a monkey, nor anything like.’

Nell was now promptly turned out of the room, on the plea of Mrs Paul being tired, by the nurse, who approved of her scientific experiments as little as did the mother. So Miss Lestrangle, with eyes dancing with fun, went down to her mother to tell her how very well Basil seemed to be, and how pretty she thought her future godson.

‘Yes,’ agreed Mrs Lestrangle doubtfully, ‘she looks well; but she is very fragile, and has very little strength. However, she is really getting better, if only we can keep parish worries from her.’

‘Peter,’ remarked Nell to that worthy individual when he came in to tea, ‘Basil seems all right, and the baby is passable for that age; but your wife shows a lamentable want of interest in scientific subjects.’

Mr Paul laughed his quiet laugh. ‘I dare say. And, pray, how has she demonstrated this since your return?’

‘Why, I was just trying to see what tenacity of clutch a baby has in comparison with a young monkey’—Mrs Lestrangle and Mr Paul both looked up, wondering what was coming next—‘and I was just trying to see how high I could lift baby by his fingers round my forefingers when Basil snatched him away, and the nurse looked as if she could have slain me.’

Mrs Lestrangle set down her untouched tea, consternation written on her face. ‘Well, really, Nell,’ she exclaimed, ‘what a dangerous thing to do! You might have dropped the child and broken his back.’

Mr Paul half laughed, but did not look quite comfortable. ‘I believe it is a scientific fact that very young babies can hold by their hands in a very marvellous way; but I think scientific experiments are best conducted by scientific people. Amateur science is not always successful. Anyway, I would rather you did not experiment upon my babies in future.’

‘I never did approve of Darwin,’ observed gentle little Mrs Lestrangle quite ruffled; ‘but if this sort of thing is the result of his teaching, I sincerely hope you will read no more of his books, Nell.’

‘Mother, dear,’ expostulated Nell, ‘everybody reads him nowadays.’

‘But everybody does not hang up little babies in consequence,’ remarked Mr Paul. ‘I am quite sure that is not what Darwin meant to be the effect of his teaching.’

‘Well, he used to experiment on his own babies anyhow,’ said Nell.

‘Poor Mrs Darwin!’ ejaculated Mrs Lestrangle with feeling. ‘At all events, I will have no such doings here; and the next experiment you attempt, off we go home. Upon that I am fully determined.’

But here Mr Paul smiled, and Nell took a fit of laughter. Mrs Lestrangle had never read a scientific book in her life, and the whole conversation was to her utterly incomprehensible.

‘I thought you paid a very short visit to Basil,’ she remarked, ‘and now I do not wonder at it, nor at nurse’s remark that visitors were bad for Mrs Paul.’

At this moment a shadow was cast upon the window. Nell looked up and saw a number of girls and women standing on the lawn, and looking up at one of the upstairs windows.

‘Who are those people, and why are they to all appearances star-gazing?’ she demanded.

‘Oh, those are Basil’s Bible-class and mothers’ meeting. She sent a message to them to say that if they liked to come up and stand on the lawn the baby should go to the window and see them. I will go up and exhibit our youngest.’

Nell groaned. ‘The parish is dreadfully *en évidence* in this Vicarage—isn’t it, mother?’

But Mrs Lestrangle had only kind things to say of people, and would not encourage Nell in her grumblings. But even she was roused to a slight show of opposition later on when the christening was being arranged.

Mrs Paul had made up her mind that it should be a parish party.

‘It is the first baby that has ever been born at this Vicarage, in fact the first Vicarage baby within the memory of man; and I particularly want to make the parishioners meet amicably together. This place is simply dreadful for quarrels; every other person has a feud with some one or other.’

Nell expostulated with her usual vehemence, and the

climax came when she heard who the second godfather was to be. The curate was one, but the other was a parishioner. Her brother-in-law informed her of the fact at dinner one night, and had a bad quarter of an hour in consequence.

‘By the way, Nell,’ he said as casually as he could, ‘we have chosen for a second godfather the superintendent of the Sunday-school. He is a very good man—really a saintly man.’

‘Isn’t he also an oilman or something of that kind?’ inquired Nell with ominous calmness.

‘Yes, he has a small shop of some kind,’ admitted Mr Paul.

‘Couldn’t you find any one more suitable among your numerous relatives?’ inquired she.

‘As regards worth, I doubt it; and I never could see the fitness of choosing godparents for their position. I know it is considered a mere form; but I do not look upon it in that light, and I could not wish for a better example for my little son than that godfather will be.’

‘Oh, well, he will perhaps be needed to counteract the pernicious effect of my example. In the meanwhile, do you mind asking Mr Jones’—the curate—‘to stand between us at the font? I don’t like all this muddling up of people. But you two are simply incorrigible. When Rosie wishes to marry the butcher’s boy you will remember my warning, and say, “Why took we not the advice of our wiser younger sister?”’

Mr Paul smiled. ‘If Rosie is her mother’s daughter she will not make any mistake of that kind.’

‘Suppose she did?’ argued Nell.


‘I shall suppose nothing of the sort,’ replied Mr Paul, which, as Nell pointed out, was simply a mean way of getting out of an argument.

Mrs Lestrangle really liked the democratic ways of Barton less than Nell; but she did not see her way to interfere, and all Nell could get her to say was, 'My dear Nell, this is Peter and Basil's house, and they must conduct it according to their consciences. Personally, I do not think so much freedom of intercourse with one's social inferiors is good for either class; but Basil is young, and will learn by experience, I trust. And it is very wonderful how she manages; she has such tact.'

Basil's mother sighed. It was not the life she would have chosen for her handsome daughter, whom she saw, from a social point of view, buried; but she accepted the inevitable, and was thankful that she had so estimable a husband.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PARISH CHRISTENING.

‘OW, about this parish christening, Peter?’ observed Nell one morning.

The Reverend Peter Paul cast about him for some tangible objection to make to this way of designating the coming ceremony; but, finding none, said, ‘Well, what about the christening?’

‘The chief point is to keep Basil out of the worry and excitement of it, of course.’

‘Well, I don’t quite know how we are to manage that. As a matter of fact, I am sorry it is to be such a big affair; but it is her own wish, and she wished to make the reconciliation of a good many of the people here a kind of thank-offering’——

‘Yes, I know,’ broke in Nell hastily. She disliked any outward expression of religious feelings beyond measure, and neither her sister nor brother-in-law were at all given to demonstration on the subject.

‘But I scarcely think her fit for so much exertion as this will entail,’ he continued.

Nell felt a kind of hopeless exasperation with the man for his blindness, but yet it was difficult to blame him. The end it was intended to compass was excellent and much to be desired; but he had no idea how unfit his wife was. High-spirited people are capable of exerting themselves far beyond

their strength without those around them being at all aware of the fact.

The christening-day arrived.

Mr Paul's dignified curate and his wife walked down to the church with Nell; and the curate's wife, but for fear of her husband, would have liked to sympathise with her.

'So very good of your sister,' she rippled on to Nell; 'almost too good, I say. People only take advantage of her. I could not do it; but then I don't pretend to be better than my neighbours; and, as for the Barton people, I have given them up long ago. They are the most cantankerous set I ever came across, and nothing will ever make them better. I just keep myself to myself, as the poor people say, and only visit the sick in my district. But your sister; she is a wonder, and we all love her; only, we can't all be Mrs Pauls.'

'Thank goodness!' said Nell, who was feeling very cross; 'nice topsy-turvy world it would be if we could.'

'Mrs Paul is a rare character,' said the curate gravely. 'The world is the better for her.'

Nell made no reply. She was contemplating a piece of mischief, and was grimly smiling to herself as she thought of the effect it would have upon her unwitting relatives.

There had been a difference of opinion at the Vicarage upon the subject of the baby's name.

'Thank goodness!' Nell had said, 'people have given up perpetuating hideous family names, so we can choose some pretty name for baby. As I am to be godmother, and the child cannot be called after me, seeing that he is a boy, it seems to me that the most appropriate name would be Granville.'

'To what hideous family name might you be alluding,

pray?' said Basil, with a very transparent affectation of ignorance. 'In my opinion the most appropriate name for a child is the one his father bears.'

'Then, why didn't you call your eldest son and heir Peter, instead of Mansfield?'

'It was my mother's name,' said Mr Paul, of which fact Nell was perfectly well aware.

'Well, I don't mind,' said Nell; 'let's have this one Lestrangle Paul. It sounds fine.'

'It does not commend itself to me as particularly euphonious,' said Mr Paul; 'but if Basil wishes'——

'I do not wish it,' said Basil with emphasis; 'neither do I think Granville Paul any better. Peter Paul goes much better; and Peter Paul he shall be.'

'Ha!' said Nell, which was a favourite expression of hers when she was annoyed. 'Basil is just jealous because I am marrying such a much prettier name,' she said to her mother.

But Mrs Lestrangle at once said, 'My dear, don't be so absurd, as if a name mattered.'

'“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,”' quoted Nell. 'At any rate, I'm thankful Granville has not such a cognomen as Peter Paul.' And, privately, Nell determined that her godson should not be handicapped by any such ugly conjunction of names.

Consequently, when they were assembled round the font, and Nell, having handed the baby to Mr Paul, who was baptising his son himself, was asked to 'Name this child,' she said coolly, 'Granville.' 'Peter,' corrected Mrs Paul, starting forward. Mr Paul, becoming agitated, and not sure whether his wife had altered her mind or not, in a fluster said, 'Granville Peter, I baptise thee'——

Mrs Paul sat back in her seat with mingled feelings, and fortunately for Nell the ludicrous side of the matter presented itself to her sister ; and, the deed being done, she half forgave Nell for choosing her lover's name. 'Moreover, he is Peter as well, and we shall simply take no notice of the Granville,' she decided.

But in this she counted without her host. Thanks to Nell's persistency, baby became Granville, or more often 'Gran' from the day of his christening ; and all the scolding Nell got was her sister's remark, 'A nice thing you have done, Nell. Those two poor boys will be Manny and Granny all their schooldays ; see if they are not. And all thanks to your impudence in naming other people's children.'

However, Nell was perfectly satisfied with her handiwork ; and, taking the curate's wife by the arm, and holding little Rosie in her other hand, said, 'Come on, let's see if we can get some sport out of this parish gathering.'

'Now, you won't make me laugh, or behave badly, will you ?' said Mrs Jones anxiously ; 'because Jimmy says I must keep up the dignity of a clergyman's wife, and I find it so very difficult.'

'Never mind dignity,' said Nell. 'You can't enjoy yourself if you are dignified ; at least that is my experience. I wish that parish godfather had not said "ha-men" so fervently ; it distracted me dreadfully.'

'Mr Smith may be an illiterate man, Miss Lestrangle ; but you would have to go far to find a better,' Nell heard the curate's voice saying. Mr Jones had evidently come to keep an eye on his wife's dignity, Nell thought to herself with amusement, for he kept close to her as long as she remained in Nell's company.

'Well,' said Nell, 'Mr Smith evidently takes his god-

parentship very seriously. I sha'n't get a look in, that's very certain; he'll be instructing that child daily, and presuming on his position to give Peter and Basil no end of advice.'

'I don't think so,' said Mr Jones; but Nell remained unconvinced.

Up at the Vicarage, Mrs Paul, who had preceded them, was sitting in state in the large dining-room receiving her guests and their gifts, a result of her party which Mrs Paul had not contemplated. Babies' shoes, queer old spoons, a pewter mug, and china bowls galore, were among the collection. If good wishes could have brought prosperity, Granville Peter was safe, and each trifle Mrs Paul received with her brilliant smile and some warm-hearted words. Little Rosie stood beside her, looking with angelic eyes at her baby-brother.

Poor Nell, bereft of any congenial spirit with whom to make fun of the whole concern, was having no sport at all. Later on, to her horror, she saw her fellow-godparent bearing down upon her.

'Being, as we are, godmother and godfather to our young gent, seems as though we ought to be acquainted,' he said.

'Oh!' said Nell.

'What I was thinking of was, I know my catechism 'tis true, and my Bible for that matter; but of course I'm not fit to teach it to the young master; but when the vicar he came and asked me fur to stand, I knew I wasn't fit to stand along of you and his reverence, and I said so; but the vicar he wouldn't take no for an answer, so I thought to myself, "Well, they'll do the learning him, and I can do the praying, and no boy's the worse for that, even if they are the prayers of an ignorant man like myself."'

And Nell had the grace to feel much ashamed of herself.

'Well, Nell,' said Mr Paul to her after supper, 'you

seemed to be getting on very well with your fellow-sponsor, I was glad to see.'

'Oh yes,' said Nell airily, 'he was instructing me in my duties, which he purposes shirking owing to a shakiness about his h's.'

'Did he say that?' asked Mr Paul.

'More or less,' replied Nell.—'Are you very tired, Basil?' she said, to change the conversation.

'Not nearly as much as I expected,' said Mrs Paul cheerily.—'Oh, Pete! how funny the people were to-day, and what odd wishes they did express for my poor little Pete.'

'Poor little Granville, indeed!' said Nell, while Mrs Lestrangle and Mr Paul exchanged glances of amusement at the rival names. 'Yes, it made me think of the christening in fairy-tale books. I was expecting to hear the lame old witch come tap-tapping along the hall, and see her come in with some evil wish. However, no one worse than Sally Coleman appeared, and I'm not sure that her wish was not a curse in disguise.'

'What was it?' asked Basil. 'I really forget what they all said. I know baby is to be beautiful, healthy, wealthy, and wise.'

'Sally only hoped he might always be as beautiful as he is now, "which they mostly ain't," she added.'

'I cannot say I wish either of my boys to grow up beautiful. I should not mind Rosie being pretty.'

'Just as well,' remarked Nell, 'as she gives promise of becoming a lovely woman.'

'Well, mother!' said Nell, when they had at last packed Basil off to bed.

'Ah, my child! I wish it were well,' and Mrs Lestrangle shook her head.

‘What is not well, mother?’ asked Nell.

‘I am thinking of Basil. She had no business to work and rush about as she did to-day. We have all tried our best to stop her; but she is so self-willed she seems to be quite blind.’

‘None so blind as those that won’t see,’ said Nell sententially. ‘As long as she can do it, and the parish continues to be what the Bishop called it the other day, the best organised parish in the diocese, so long will Basil continue not to see—anything.’

Mrs Lestrangle sighed. ‘At any rate,’ she said, ‘I shall not let you be sacrificed too. They made you very ill over those theatricals; and now that you have come home so much the better for your trip abroad I shall keep you at home and take care of you, especially after what Granville says.’

What Granville had said in a very strong letter to Mrs Lestrangle was that from all accounts Mrs Paul was killing herself by parish work, and had very nearly killed Nell by the same means; and that, at the risk of being thought selfish, he must beg Mrs Lestrangle not to allow Nell to be victimised by her sister and brother-in-law. He expressed his strong disapproval of Mr Paul for allowing so much work to be done, and pointed out that Nell’s presence at the Vicarage made things no better, whereas her absence might bring things to a climax, and make the Pauls see their mistake.

In consequence of this letter, Mrs Lestrangle carried Nell off to town with her soon after the christening.

As Mr Granville Neville had opined, the absence of her bright, cheery, energetic self did indeed bring things to a climax. Many were the entreaties that Nell should come down for a few weeks; and Nell, in spite of her lover’s

prohibition, would have gone to her beloved sister ; but Mrs Lestrangle, yielding in most matters, was obdurate in this case.

‘No, Nell,’ she said firmly. ‘I highly disapprove of this gigantic bazaar they are having at Barton. To begin with, and after Granville’s letter, I absolutely decline to let you go and be overstrained again, as you were at that last business. Besides’——

‘Besides’ meant Mr William Neville, whose obvious devotion to Nell Mrs Lestrangle eyed with natural disfavour. Nell hastened to interrupt.

‘I suppose it is useless my arguing ; but you know that my breakdown over those theatricals was entirely my own fault. I chose to do it ; and no one could have stopped me.’

‘Precisely why I will not let you go down again to help in parish entertainments at Barton. As you have just said, you will overwork ; and neither Peter nor Basil apparently have the power, if they have the will, to stop you. And we shall have Granville home in a couple of months ; and then’——

And then Nell blushed beautifully, and said no more.

So Nell stopped at home and contented herself with making a multitude of useless articles for the grand bazaar, which was the one topic of conversation not only in Barton but in all the countryside.

CHAPTER XVI.

IF ONLY —



T was the day before Good Friday, and Mrs Lestrangle and Nell sat in their pretty London drawing-room, which looked out upon some gardens.

‘Did I see a letter for you from Barton to-day, Nell?’ inquired her mother.

‘Yes, from Basil,’ replied Nell, and said no more.

‘What did she say?’ asked Mrs Lestrangle.

‘The usual thing,’ said Nell. ‘She is frightfully busy, what with decorating the church for Easter, and the bazaar. Cannot understand why I do not come down to help her, and says that if she succumbs to this bazaar it will be all my fault.’

‘Your fault, indeed!’ said Mrs Lestrangle indignantly. ‘At any rate, she sees that she is doing too much; perhaps after this bazaar she will consent to take a long rest. I am thinking of asking them all to come to Scotland with us for a couple of months. It would do Basil all the good in the world.’

‘She says Rosie has tried on her blue Liberty cloak and hat that I sent down, and looks a little angel in them, and that she hopes the admiration, not to say worship, the child gets in the village will not turn her head.’

And so the two talked; and just then the post brought a

box of primroses which Rosie and Mansfield had picked for Auntie Nell.

Before they had finished smelling and enjoying them, there came a telegram: 'Do not touch the primroses. Infection. Letter follows.—BASIL.'

'Dear me,' said Mrs Lestrangle, 'I wonder what is the matter. Probably the children have measles.'

'How thoughtful, and like Basil, to telegraph about the infection.'

'Poor children! How tiresome, and we cannot hear till Saturday. Basil must have forgotten that.'

She had; and her little scribbled note to say that Rosie had scarlatina came at the same time on Saturday morning as one from Mr Paul to say that Rosie was very ill indeed; and then came an urgent telegram to mother to come.

Mrs Lestrangle was in the train within an hour, poor Nell being left behind to endure the woman's part of waiting.

It was Saturday when Mrs Lestrangle went, and on Monday morning came a letter to Nell telling her that Basil and Rosie were both dangerously ill.

Somehow Nell never had any hope from that moment. Her friends the Kilpatricks, who came to her as soon as Mrs Lestrangle was sent for, tried in vain to cheer her.

'I believe they are both dead,' she said as she sat there in stony despair.

'My dear, don't say such dreadful things,' said Mrs Kilpatrick.

'I feel it,' said Nell. 'I feel somehow as if there were no Basil now, and no Rosie. I can't explain why; but I am sure of it.'

'Well, mother,' said Mabel, 'suppose we send a telegram

saying, "Nell much troubled, and in state of suspense. Please telegraph the truth."

'You can send that if you like,' said Nell; 'but I know what the answer will be.'

Feeling that anything was better than Nell's present state, Mabel sent off the telegram in her own name.

When the answer came she was on the watch for it, and flew to the door to prevent the telegraph-boy from knocking. She tore open the yellow envelope with trembling hands:

'Mother and daughter have gone home. His will be done.—PETER.'

As she turned, stunned, to go upstairs, wondering in her mind how she was to break the news to Nell, she met the latter dressed for going out. There was no need to tell her.

'Nell,' cried Mabel, her voice choked with tears.

'I know,' said Nell. 'I knew they were'—— She could not finish.

'Where are you going?' cried Mabel.

'Where?' cried Nell wildly. 'Down there, of course. I shall at least see her.'

'But, Nell, the infection?' began Mabel.

Nell turned on her fiercely. 'What do I care for that now?'

There was no stopping her, so for the third time Nell appeared unexpectedly at Barton Vicarage.

As she alighted at the station she was greeted by tolling bells, and shuddered as she remembered their first arrival and her sister's prophetic words.

All along the station men stood with bared heads as she passed, and women turned aside as if they could not bear to look at her. One of the reasons for this (which did not strike Nell), apart from their feeling of respect, was her likeness to her sister Basil.



She met Nell dressed for going out. There was no need to tell her.

In a dream, Nell passed out of the silent station-yard, silent in spite of the many people and vehicles, and started to walk up the long village street to the Vicarage. They did not expect her, so no carriage had been sent to meet her; and Nell did not feel inclined to get into the public omnibus.

The first cottage had the blinds closely drawn, and Nell found herself stupidly wondering who was dead of the family; but as she walked slowly on she saw every blind on both sides of the road drawn, and in one little house where a blind was an unknown luxury an old piece of black stuff was keeping out the light. Still the feeling of unreality remained; but with it mingled a deadly desolation. Nell wondered if she should ever get to the end of the long mile and a quarter of village street to be traversed.

There was a sound of wheels behind her, of which she took little heed till they stopped as they overtook her.

‘Miss Nell!’ Somehow the Bartonites, high and low, rich and poor, fell into the habit of calling Eleanor Lestrangle ‘Miss Nell,’ not, as she pointed out to her sister and brother-in-law, by her lawful title, Miss Lestrangle. So the speaker, a farmer who lived in an outlying district of Barton, quite naturally addressed her thus: ‘Miss Nell, will you let me drive you up to the Vicarage?’

Nell looked up drearily. ‘But it is out of your way, Mr Yorrick.’

For answer the farmer threw the reins on the horse’s back, and, getting down from the high dog-cart, said, ‘Step up, miss. I’ll hold your umbrella;’ and he wondered why Nell smiled a washed-out smile and then shivered. She had, as Basil always accused her of doing, arrived with an umbrella as sole luggage; but this time there was no more to follow, for Nell had walked past Mabel Kilpatrick, and was in a

hansom before the latter had recovered her self-possession ; and when she and her mother, having hastily put on hats and coats and thrown a few necessaries into Nell's travelling-bag, arrived at Paddington, Nell was not to be seen. She had evidently just caught a train and gone.

'It is a very risky thing to have done,' said Mr Kilpatrick angrily when he heard of it ; 'and remember you must not go near her when she returns. I will not have Mabel run any such awful risk.'

Mrs Kilpatrick was glad that she was not scolded for having allowed Nell to go ; but apparently Mr Kilpatrick knew Nell and her headstrong ways too well to lay the blame anywhere but on the proper shoulders ; and on them there was weight enough.

Mr Yorrick drove Nell briskly through the village. As they passed Miss Nesbit's they saw Will Neville just coming out of the Old Vicarage House. His office was closed. He lifted his hat ; but after one single glance looked down as Nell passed.

'Has Mr Neville been ill again ? He looks very white,' said Nell. It was her first remark.

'I don't think so,' returned the farmer ; 'but we have not any of us much colour to-day, I doubt.' And Nell relapsed into silence. Just then a man leading a cow came in view. At sight of Nell he stood stock still, and the cow took advantage of his inattention to wind its rope round and round him. The man's violent and unavailing efforts to free himself, which were ludicrous in the extreme, aroused in Nell a wild, uncontrollable desire to laugh which with difficulty she suppressed and turned into a kind of gasp. Often afterwards she would think of that painful feeling.

At the Vicarage gate the farmer stopped and hesitated.

‘Excuse me, Miss Nell; but the doctor has given strict orders that we are not to go to the Vicarage for a day or so.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Nell. ‘I did not think. Let me down, please, and thank you very much.’

The farmer made another attempt to say what was much on his mind. ‘I suppose you’ve had it, miss; but still ’tis a terrible risk. If you would stop with us till—till it’s over.’

‘It’s all right, Mr Yorrick,’ said Nell with a wan smile. ‘I sha’n’t catch anything. It’s only the good people’—— She stopped, and, shaking his hand, turned to go up the drive; and the farmer turned too, and drove off without a word. It said much for his delicacy of feeling that he offered Nell no condolence.

Nell opened the Vicarage door and stepped into a hall reeking of sulphur. Half-choked, she made for the first room. It was the study. As she opened the door of the darkened room a figure sitting with bent head at the table looked up: it was Peter.

‘Basil!’ he cried eagerly, and rose from his chair. And as Nell drew back in bewilderment, he sank back covering his eyes, and said, ‘Forgive me, Nell. For the minute, in the half-light, you looked so like’——

‘Let me see her, Peter,’ was all she said.

He shook his head. ‘I dare not, Nell. The doctor has forbidden’——

‘He has no right to forbid’—— began Nell impulsively.

But Peter, putting her gently into a chair, said, ‘You ought not to have come at all. Mother will be terribly upset about it. Now, you must have some food at once; I am sure you have had no lunch to-day.’

Nell shook her head. 'It is no use, Peter; I could not eat, so you need not try to force me.'

But Mr Paul went away, and returned presently with some very strong beef-tea. 'You must drink this before you see mother,' he said; and Nell, to her own surprise, drank it.

Mr Paul looked old and haggard, and his hair seemed to have more gray in it; but he remained calm and gentle, and very thoughtful.

'Where are'—— she said, and stopped. She could not say the children, for, alas! the one of whom she always thought when she said the children was no more.

'The boys are at the Old Vicarage House. Miss Nesbit kindly took them in when we found it was infectious; but now that you have been here you must not go near them. However, this evening we will go and see them through the window,' said Mr Paul; and he said it all in such a calm, even voice, and showed such an alertness for details, that Nell found herself wondering how deep his grief was! But when after being utterly broken down herself at sight of her mother, Nell made a remark of this sort to the latter, she was quite shocked.

'Peter's resignation is beautiful. When you think of his loss, compared with ours, one feels humiliated at one's own despair in the presence of a faith which can rise above the present, and look on.'

But Nell only groaned with a queer twitch of her mouth. She observed, 'We can never get another sister.'

Mrs Lestrangle declined to take notice of a hint which certainly was not in very good taste; but said quietly, 'You have another sister, Nell.'

'Oh, Julia!' said Nell indifferently. 'I don't care for her.'

‘Eleanor!’ said Mrs Lestrangle.

‘Well, it’s true,’ said Nell obstinately. ‘I can’t help it. You can’t like people to order. I never asked for her for an elder sister.’

But Mrs Lestrangle said gravely, ‘Let us at this time be thankful for the mercies left us.’

Just at present Mrs Lestrangle was feeling more thankfulness that the terrible suffering which she had witnessed for two days was over, than desolated at her loss. That would come; but Nell did not inherit her high spirits from her mother, who was a meek and submissive woman. Besides, the attitude of Mr Paul had an influence; he was, as every one save Nell said, bearing it beautifully. Mrs Lestrangle was at first much distressed and alarmed at Nell’s sudden and unauthorised appearance at Barton Vicarage; but on reflection she felt that the girl would have pined terribly in town, and the precautions taken to disinfect were so thorough that she hoped for the best; besides, the deed was done. Only, both she and Mr Paul were firm in keeping Nell from the infected part of the house.

All the time Nell felt a kind of sullen resentment against her brother-in-law and mother, because they did not gird against fate as she did. ‘If only they would complain and blame those wretched people who caused it all!’ she said to herself over and over again.

But Mr Paul blamed no one. It was God’s will, and as such he accepted it; and Mrs Lestrangle had learnt to suffer.

The way of it, humanly speaking, was as follows:

A family in the village had fever; and through carelessness, which is only too common among the lower classes, failed to notify it or call in the doctor; and not only did they suppress the fact for fear of the inconveniences it might

entail, but they came up to the Vicarage for relief; and little Rosie, true to her character of ministering angel to the last, helped to give out jellies, &c. She was a delicate child, and stood no chance from the first; nor did the mother, run down and with no reserve strength to fall back upon. And after three days of terrible suffering, for the disease attacked them both, the two succumbed within a few hours of each other.

The villagers with one consent turned upon the family who caused the mischief, and the Clutterbucks had a bad time of it for some weeks. But the vicar's action in the matter was characteristic. The first parochial visit he paid after it was all over was to those same Clutterbucks. And Mrs Clutterbuck, who had got ready to defend herself, did not realise till he was gone that he had merely called to give her some pecuniary help and say a few words of congratulation that she had got through the children's sickness so happily. A lump came in her throat as she looked after his retreating figure. 'He's a saint if ever there was one on the face of the earth,' she muttered. 'God forgive me, for I was the innocent cause of his troubles, poor man!'

After a dinner which they scarcely touched, Mr Paul said: 'Will you come into the study and sit with me? I have had a book sent me by a neighbouring clergyman, which I thought of reading aloud. It is *Meditations on Job*.'

Nell felt again that wild desire to laugh; but Mrs Lestrangle accepted the invitation with eagerness. The three repaired to the study, where Mr Paul, in a voice which grew brighter as he proceeded, read on and on what seemed to Nell platitudes on resignation by some one who could never have felt what she felt at this moment. And as she sat in her easy-chair, staring now gloomily into the fire and now

resentfully at her brother-in-law's face, lit up as it was by a consolation of which Nell knew nothing, she thought 'they simply don't know what grief is.' But she did the writer of that special book injustice, for he happened to be a strong man, who had suffered, but had used his strength to crush his natural feeling; and Mr Paul though he had not that stoical strength, called his sweet yielding nature to his aid to bear the aching void which, whatever Miss Nell might think, he undoubtedly did feel, and felt deeply.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MOURNING VILLAGE.



Mr Paul was reading the closing words of a chapter of the book he had elected to read aloud, a knock came at the door. In the strained state of their nerves they all started. Mr Paul got up to answer it himself, saying, 'I told the servants to take a short walk after dinner, and then go to bed.'

It appeared that it was to arrange for the double funeral on Wednesday.

'We must telegraph to Jay's, Nell,' Mrs Lestrangle said; but Nell took no notice. So Mrs Lestrangle wrote out a long telegram to Mr Kilpatrick, with the result that on Wednesday morning all the necessary trappings of woe came down in time for the hurried ceremony.

On Tuesday and Wednesday letters of condolence and wreaths poured in till the latter had at last to be deposited in the coach-house. The Reverend Peter Paul took a quiet and grateful interest in all these matters, while Nell felt that the strong scent of the tuberose and other flowers made her faint; and ever afterwards the scent of these flowers brought a feeling of melancholy over her.

Wednesday dawned, a cold, windy, unsympathetic day. Twelve o'clock was the time fixed for the double funeral. A little before, Mr Paul, accompanied by his mother and sister-

in-law, went to the drawing-room, and knelt by the side of what held the remains of the lost ones, and Nell found herself as it were outside herself, criticising her own and every one else's attitude, and asking herself how they, her mother and brother, could bear it so calmly.

Then they went out on to the round gravel-plot where the procession was to start from. All down the long, ugly drive on both sides stood black-clothed men at a distance of about a yard from each other. Nell, wondering where they all came from, found herself deliberately calculating how many there were. They were almost the entire male population for miles round: squires, farmers, doctors, retired military men, and lawyers.

Not a relative had come. Certainly Mr Paul advised them of the danger. They were all panic-stricken; and, not venturing to enter the infected Vicarage, had contented themselves with sending long telegrams and letters of condolence and sympathy.

One only of the neighbouring clergy came to see their desolate brother. He belonged to an anglican brotherhood and was a bachelor.

'You see they have their families to think of,' said Mrs Lestrangle.

'Which is another argument, in favour of a celibate priesthood,' remarked Nell, out of sheer perverseness, to her mother, who, as part of her evangelical views, held it in abhorrence.

So the procession, headed by the three mourners, slowly walked down the long drive after the two flower-laden coffins, and into the churchyard which Mrs Paul had helped so greatly to beautify, little thinking that she was to be the first to be laid in the newly planted ground.

These and other thoughts flitted through Nell's mind, and then they were banished as they entered the church, one mass of black-clad people, in garish contrast to the lovely Easter decorations and masses of primroses.

Afterwards the villagers told Nell how the dressmakers had worked night and day to get the orders finished ; and how the cantankerous wife of the lawyer waived her claim to have a dress made that her arch-enemy might have one in time, as she (the lawyer's wife) had a black gown, and Mrs Toms had none ; how the shops did a roaring trade in black that week, but had their spring season ruined, for no bright colours were seen in Barton for weeks ; and how willing hands had lined the deep grave throughout with primroses, so that it should seem a soft bed.

But at the time it did not strike Nell to wonder how all the women managed to be in black gowns, or in fact to wonder at anything except that she was there, and seemed to have no feeling.

Then it was over, and they all went home.

Mr Paul sat in his study and docketed, as he answered, each separate letter. Well, it gave him something to do, Nell thought ; and she sent cards with 'Thanks for kind sympathy' to all, even her most intimate friends, to their great indignation.

'If one could see any sense in it,' she murmured again and again. 'She just killed herself, and none of us could stop her ; and now look at the result ! A desolate house, a helpless man left with two delicate boys, one a baby a few months old. If only we had known we would have made her rest, or I would have come down to help her. Ah ! if only—but now it is too late.' So, with a sense of impotence which was maddening, Nell girded against fate ; and perhaps her brother-

in-law's and mother's meek bowing beneath the rod only added fuel to her wrath.

Nell was the only person who did not call the vicar's behaviour at this time beautiful. She shrugged her shoulders, and said some showed their feelings one way, some another. If she had Mr Paul's particular character she should probably take it the same way.

But Nell's oracular and obscure remarks had not received much attention; and even they had only been uttered for Mrs Lestrangle's benefit. Mr Paul was not what would be called a stoical man, as may be seen; but in spite of that he was beloved by men as well as women, and that was a strange fact which Nell was obliged to admit, though she could not for the life of her understand why. As has been said, in her estimate of her brother-in-law she was in a minority of one, which does not count.

Mr Paul implored his mother and sister-in-law not to leave him just at present, and so they stayed on for two or three dreary weeks. The house was thoroughly fumigated; and after they had, as Nell said, been suffocated for days, they were given a clean bill of health by the sanitary inspectors, and the two children came home. Perhaps the pathos of the situation had never been realised till then.

Arrangements were made for an elderly housekeeper to come and look after them and the house, after they had all had a holiday; but meanwhile every one avoided looking forward. Nell's marriage would, of course, have to be postponed; but no one spoke of it at present. Then, to fulfil the proverb that misfortunes never come singly, came the news that Mrs Lestrangle's eldest daughter, the Julia whom Nell in her passionate grief for the loss of her favourite sister had said she did not 'care for,' had lost her husband

in one of the petty, inglorious engagements in India, and was coming home by the next boat.

So Mrs Lestrangle had to return to town to meet the widow ; and Mr Paul, in dread of being left in his desolate Vicarage, took his holiday then.

He had during the three weeks after his wife's death gone steadily the round of his parish, so that he might get the first visits over ; but, really, Nell suspected it was that he might hear the people talk of her. Then each evening he would come back with a budget of tales of her goodness, or anecdotes about Rosie, till Nell felt as if she could bear no more.

'She seems to have found time to do so many kindnesses that I've never heard of or suspected. How she got it all in I can't conceive,' he would say, taking a melancholy pleasure in going over them.

Nell thought she could have told him ; but what availed it now to say that she had done two or three ordinary women's work. So Mr Paul continued, 'Every one had some special kindness to tell of. It is not one or two, but just every one, high and low. She got at their wants somehow, and she thought of these things. That's the point. Lots of us would do kind things if we thought of them, or knew just the things we ought to do ; but, somehow, one doesn't think.'

Nell thought Mr Paul had never made a truer remark ; but she made no reply. There did not seem any to make. But never did she take leave of any place with such heart-felt desire never to set eyes on it again as she did poor Barton, even though there was not a very cheering prospect at the other end. Poor Mrs Lestrangle was in a state of collapse. The second blow, though of course a much slighter

one, proved the last straw; and perhaps it was as well for Nell that she had her mother's health to think of at this time.

All that the Kilpatricks could get out of Nell on her return when they injudiciously tried to offer her some condolences was, 'Well, at the rate our family is being killed off, we sha'n't any of us be here many years, so you see it does not much matter.' The which unexpected and unseemly remark had the effect of stopping the floodgates of sympathy, which was just what Nell wished.

Julia—or, to call her by her married name, Mrs Spencer—arrived not at all prostrate. 'They don't seem to care much,' was Nell's bitter remark. But, of course, Mrs Spencer did care, though she was a much harder character than either of her younger sisters, Nell and Basil. She announced her intention of taking up her residence with Mrs Lestrangle; and, as Nell was to be married in a few months, she did not trouble herself at the advent of a new and probably disturbing element in the hitherto peaceable household.

'Mr Neville is to be home soon, and I shall be quite happy; Peter potters about and does his duty, and he will soon be happy, and the boys will forget her; mother says we must be resigned; and Julia does not care, of course. No one will miss her, and nothing seems to matter. She lived and loved and wasted her great heart on others, just killing herself for them, and they—forget; and the world jogs on as if she had never lived.' So the undisciplined girl said to herself, 'We are none of us indispensable.'

It is a truth that only bitter experience teaches, and even then it is a lesson learnt only by the few.

Eleanor Lestrangle was one of the brightest and cheeriest of mortals, save for the space of her engagement, and she

remained such all her life ; but, from the day of Basil and Rosie's death life was never quite the same to her again. Time is a great healer, and mercifully so ; but the scar remains. With Nell, though it would never be suspected, the scar left was a large one, for the wound had gone deep.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE.



ELL was going to be quite happy, because Granville Neville was coming home. 'Man never is, but always to be blest.'

Mr Neville arrived, however, handsome and more affectionate than ever. The soft seriousness, which was Nell's chief mark of the trouble she had been through, gave her an additional attraction in the eyes of her *fiancé*, who submitted with fairly good grace to the inevitable postponement of his wedding for six months. This was the length of his furlough, which he explained was an extra simply taken for the express purpose of being married.

'And I should not have got it,' he remarked with a laugh, 'if they had not wanted a married man. It happens to be a post where a wife is almost a *sine qua non*. I doubt whether a confirmed bachelor would be put in it.'

'Well,' said Nell, with some of the old spirit, 'I don't know that I quite like that. It looks as if I were part of the furniture thrown in, so to speak.'

But Mr Neville hastened to efface any unflattering impression he might have made, and was emphatic in his assurances that Nell, and Nell only, would induce him to take a wife back to India. In the meantime he waited dutifully upon Nell, and Nell was, as she had expected to be, quite

happy. Though she sometimes felt, paradoxical as it may seem, a pang at the thought that she was so happy.

Mr Paul had taken a month's holiday, and gone back to Barton with his two little boys, and also the elderly housekeeper, who promised to do all that lay in her power to fill the vacant place.

'No one human being could fill that place,' said Nell to her mother when the sad little party had gone; 'simply because Basil was half-a-dozen people rolled into one. But at least she will be kind to the children.'

This she certainly was, if spoiling them is a proof of kindness; but Mr Paul, who found a consolation in a voluminous correspondence with Mrs Lestrangle and Nell, wrote piteous letters about her incompetence and the irksomeness of her presence; and after about a fortnight he arrived in town to talk the matter over with the Lestranges.

'I could stand everything else, though the house is getting into a very untidy and dirty condition, and the children never seem to have clean pinafores on; but I cannot stand her coming into my study and sitting there.'

'Why don't you tell her not to?' said Nell bluntly. 'That's easy enough.'

'I really couldn't do such a thing, Nell,' said Mr Paul, and he said truly. 'Do you think you could come down and say so?'

'Oh, you coward!' laughed Nell. 'Why should I do your dirty work?'

'Neville could come too,' he urged wilyly.

Mr Neville was not particularly elated at the prospect; but, as he said, 'Poor beggar! We may as well go and cheer him up a bit.' So he manfully suppressed all longings for clubs and social intercourse with his numerous friends in

town, and went down with Nell to Barton. As he very well knew, revisiting the place was not half the trial to him that it was to Nell; but Nell was determined, for Granville's sake, and in fact for the sake of every one else, to be cheerful; and perhaps she overdid it a little, for the villagers said, 'It was well to be Miss Nell, for she did not take things to heart like some.'

'Mercy on us!' said Nell, as she entered the Vicarage. 'Peter did not exaggerate the state of the house.' The hall, and study, and every room, looked as if uncared for.

'What are the servants about?' And then it came out that the housemaid had left in disgust at a moment's notice, and a woman was doing the work; while the cook had given a month's warning. But the climax was the condition of the nursery, where the nurse, whose incompetence had not appeared under her late mistress, reigned amid chaos.

Nell set to work to improve matters with great energy, and the elderly housekeeper went.

Mr Neville endured a fortnight of it, during which he saw very little of Nell; and then the dullness was too much for him, and he found that pressing business required his presence in town. Nell was not in the least taken in by the plea, and felt his desertion keenly; but she resisted all attempts to carry her off home. Little Mansfield's pathetic cry as he clasped his little arms round her neck when she arrived in the nursery, 'Now, we's going to be like it used to be. I'se been so lonely,' kept her, and was destined to pull at her heartstrings for many a day.

The villagers with one consent chimed in with entreaties that she should stop. Everything in the village was at a standstill. The curate's wife either could not or would not do any parish work, her husband declaring that she was not

strong enough, and Nell could not in her heart blame him. Meanwhile, all the different organisations Mr and Mrs Paul had so enthusiastically started languished and threatened to collapse. Mr Paul seemed to have no energy left after doing what was absolutely necessary, and sat reading—presumably consolatory books—in his study.

‘Do ’e stay a bit now, Miss Nell,’ they said. ‘We ’re fair down, and there don’t seem nothing cheerful about ; and you’re like a bit of her. That cheerful and bright she were, wi’ that smile. Well, there never was any smile quite like Mrs Paul’s.’

And so Nell stayed ; and, after setting the house in order, and taking back the penitent housemaid, who came up and shed floods of tears as she said, ‘I would never have done it if the housekeeper had not been past bearing,’ she set to work to rouse and cheer her brother-in-law, who, amiable man that he was, soon responded ; and if truth be known, he rather irritated Nell by his calmness and the alacrity with which he accepted the sacrifice Nell was making in staying away from her *fiancé*.

That gentleman began to get restive, and declared that London was unbearable without Nell, and that he thought she owed a duty to him ; but Nell looked at the two little pale boys, and resisted the temptation to go to him.

Next came a letter from Mr Neville, saying that as she apparently had no intention of returning, he thought he should go North on the 12th, shooting. He had not really meant to go ; but to his surprise and disgust Nell wrote back advising him by all means to go, as she meant to stay at Barton for August.

So Mr Neville went to a friend’s shooting-box in Scotland, and Nell stayed at Barton, and cried herself to sleep night after night, and kept the whole house and indeed the

whole village lively day by day. For Basil's sake she occasionally played with the tennis club, and finally she gave Basil's boys a treat, and helped her brother-in-law to form a boys' cricket-club in one of the Vicarage fields.

The parish work in summer was naturally lighter, and no one looked forward. Mr Paul grew as cheerful as it ever was his nature to be ; Mrs Lestrangle came down, and sighed ; but at present things were drifting and no one knew whither. Mr Paul had with unwonted energy expressed his determination to have no more housekeepers.

'I really can't stand it, mother,' he would say. 'I want companionship, and they can't give it, though they try ; and, as for comfort, they only upset the servants. Cook is a very good manager ; and, as for the rest, I must manage alone, and you must come down now and then and take pity on me.'

At present the Reverend Peter Paul was not in such great need of pity. His house and parish were getting on all right, and Nell was untiring in her efforts to cheer up every one, and succeeded very fairly, till the inevitable day came when Mrs Lestrangle spoke of the necessity of their return to town to prepare Nell's trousseau. Mr Paul's dejection and despair were dreadful to see ; but Mrs Lestrangle insisted upon dragging Nell off, 'in justice to Granville,' as she said.

Mr Neville was in town to meet them, and the slight 'difference' which had arisen between the young couple appeared to have disappeared ; but they had not been back a week when a desperate letter came from Mr Paul : Baby was ill ; the nurse proved untrustworthy. Would Mrs Lestrangle send another, and could Nell come for a couple of days ? The coachman's wife was doing the nursing at present.

'Upon my word,' said Mr Neville, 'I like the man's cheek ! I think he forgets you are shortly to be my wife. Just write

and tell him that you have something else to do than to dance attendance on him, and that he must manage his affairs in future without your assistance, as I shall require all your attention.'

To do Mr Neville justice, he did not think this was anything more than a childish ailment, or he would not have spoken so unsympathetically.

But Nell, with the memory of the last illness in that house, was in a great state of alarm. Her little godson, who was a most lovely and fascinating baby of a year, was very dear to her heart, so she spoke impulsively as usual.

'I shall write nothing of the sort,' she replied, 'for the very good reason that I am going down by the first train this morning.'

'I absolutely forbid it,' said Mr Neville, pale with anger, at the bottom of which was an unacknowledged jealousy of his future brother-in-law.

'I deny your right to keep me from my dead sister's sick child,' said Nell, her eyes blazing, 'and I shall go.'

'Then you had better stay there. The only pity is that the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill has not passed.'

He regretted the insulting words the moment they were out of his mouth; but Nell gave him no time to apologise. With one look of horror at Granville she rose from the breakfast-table, took off her engagement ring, left it beside him, and swept from the room without a word.

Mrs Lestrange was not down to breakfast, or the scene would never have occurred. Mr Neville, slipping the ring into his pocket, pushed back his chair, and got up and walked to the window. He was very much ashamed of himself; but he was also very angry with Nell. He felt himself very ill-used. 'As for that Paul,' he muttered, 'he killed his

own wife, and now he wants to kill mine. But he sha'n't if I can help it !' Though Mr Neville meant to apologise, he was quite determined that Nell should not go to Barton. For the next half-hour he was rehearsing all sorts of pretty and penitent speeches to Nell, and expected her to reappear equally penitent, or perhaps looking so handsome and defiant, when he heard the front door open, and, looking out, saw the maid hail a passing hansom, into which Nell stepped, and the maid handed her her travelling-bag.

Mr Granville Neville could scarcely believe his eyes. 'She is really going, and without saying one word to me !'

At that moment Mr Neville's strongest emotion was one of jealousy, blind unreasoning jealousy. He had not meant for a moment what he said that morning, but he said to himself now, 'They are all alike—girls are. A black coat always fetches them. I'm not religious, and she thinks more of that helpless chap than she does of me ; but I'll have her in spite of herself, and I'll make her happy, God willing.' It was of no personal disloyalty to him that Granville accused Nell ; and if Nell had come back at that minute all would have been well between them. But Nell was well on her way to Barton, injured feelings and wrath in her heart, mingled with anxiety, which was not lessened when she arrived and found baby very ill.

Nell was quite brusque to her brother-in-law when he began effusive thanks ; but she could not help feeling gratified at the relief her presence brought.

'We know'd you'd a come, miss,' said the coachman as he drove her from the station. 'It will be all right now.' And the villagers stood at their gates and nodded their delight and relief at the sight of her ; and Nell would not have been human if she had not felt pleased.

So when Mrs Lestrangle, who was not at all pleased at her going, after a long talk with Mr Neville, sent a peremptory command to return, Nell coolly wrote back and said that she had come to years of discretion, and that she was not going to forsake poor Basil's sick baby for any one. She ignored all mention of Granville.

Mrs Lestrangle was very angry and very much disturbed. She wished for Nell's marriage beyond everything, and she was by no means desirous that Nell should make herself indispensable at Barton. 'He must stand alone sooner or later, poor fellow ; and one day he will find consolation. It seems shocking to speak of it so soon ; but a man in that position is so helpless that it is inevitable.'

Meanwhile Nell was at Barton, where she was evidently much needed, and declined to come either for threats or entreaties.

Then Granville did the best thing to be done under the circumstances : he went down to Barton to apologise in person and fetch Nell home.

As fate would have it, little Mansfield heard Nell speaking to some one of her probable departure in a week or so, now that baby was better ; for, Granville or no Granville, Nell did not purpose remaining permanently at Barton. He was an excitable, nervous child, and must have been dreaming of it, for he woke up screaming and calling for Auntie Nell to come and never to leave him again to be so lonely. 'Everybody dies or goes away,' he sobbed ; 'and it's so miserable without you.' Then Nell could only quiet him by taking him into her own bed and promising never to leave him again.

What that promise would entail she did not at the moment see. Perhaps some wild thought of taking him abroad with

her for a year or so flitted through her mind. At any rate, the impulse of the moment was to soothe the little fellow, who was becoming quite hysterical, and finally frightened her by going off into a kind of faint.

So, when Mr Neville arrived the day after this scene, Nell, with it fresh in her mind, refused to go back with him or to think or speak of their marriage; and then, in spite of his good resolutions, Mr Neville's temper rose, and one bitter word was followed by another. So Mr Neville returned to town that night with his ring still in his pocket, having parted with Nell in anger.

'Remember, Nell,' he said to her, 'I am no boy to be played with. If you send me away now you send me away for ever. It is the second time. There shall be no third.'

'And I am no girl, but a woman; and I consider that my duty lies here,' said Nell with outward calm.

Mr Neville clenched his hands tightly over his hat. 'Very well,' he said between his teeth, 'and when Mr Paul has no further need of you, and throws you away like a worn-out glove, then you will realise that you have thrown away your true happiness for a blunder.' Then he went, leaving his words echoing in Nell's ears.

'Has he gone?' asked Mr Paul's gentle voice as he came into the drawing-room, where Nell stood, just as she stood when Mr Neville was there.

'Yes,' said Nell, and she roused herself to go up to the nursery.

'I'm so glad, Nell!' said Mr Paul. 'I could not have spared you yet.'

Nell smiled for answer.

'I seem to have no feeling at all,' she wonderingly said to herself as she mounted the stairs.

CHAPTER XIX.

A USELESS SACRIFICE?



MR PAUL is certainly a most unfortunate man,' said his neighbours, and with reason, for his boys were down with measles, the baby taking the disease very badly.

Nell's hands were full. Poor Mrs Lestrangle, always at the beck and call of her relatives, came down to assist, in spite of the protests of her widowed daughter, who had now taken up her abode with her. Finding protests fruitless, Mrs Spencer proceeded, 'Now, mamma, since you will go, I trust at least you will bring Nell home. I suppose matters between her and Mr Neville are beyond hope of patching up—a most unfortunate thing; it was such a desirable match. But at least she cannot stay at Barton; people will talk.'

Mrs Lestrangle sighed. 'It is a very difficult matter. Nell has taken the bit into her mouth, and I cannot hold her in. Besides, some one is really wanted at Barton. Still, I mean to try and bring her home, though I doubt whether she will return until Mr Neville has sailed.'

'I hear some talk of a marriage between him and a lively young widow. I don't know if there is any truth in it.'

'I should hope not,' cried Mrs Lestrangle indignantly. 'It would not show much respect for Nell.'

'Oh! as for that,' said Mrs Spencer carelessly, 'he would

do it out of pique if he did it at all, and also because he really needs a wife out there. Besides, you can't expect him to feel much respect for a girl who had deliberately jilted him, as Nell has done, goodness knows why.'

There was, as may be supposed, very little sympathy between Mrs Lestrangle's eldest and youngest daughter; and Mrs Lestrangle's sympathy being with Nell in spite of her vagaries, she did not care to discuss her any further, so took her departure to Barton amid a shower of advice.

Nell was very thankful to see her mother. It was soon borne in upon the latter that, strange as it may seem, people were not going to talk about Nell's presence at the Vicarage except as the most natural thing in the world.

People round, hearing she was there, began to call and show tokens of friendliness. The tragedy of the spring had made a profound impression. The vicar's character for piety apparently silenced gossip, and now the children's further illness made a sister's presence a necessity. Mrs Lestrangle began to fear that she should return to town alone. She mooted the question to Nell, whose mind was thoroughly made up.

'For the next two years I have promised to stop here with Peter,' she said. 'You have Julia, mamma, and do not need me; Peter does. Moreover, I may as well say that there is no house large enough to contain Julia and me; so that things being as they are, I am best down here.'

'But, my dear, I do not like it,' said Mrs Lestrangle feebly. She did not like to say straight out what she meant: that it was not quite the thing.

Nell, if she understood her mother, did not choose to show that she did, for she replied, 'Nor do I like being away from you, dear mother; but it seems the right thing to do; and

surely you would not have me leave Basil's bairns to the tender mercies of strangers?'

Mrs Lestrange gave it up. Circumstances were too strong for her.

'Well, Nell,' was her parting remark to her self-willed daughter, 'I only hope you are not making a useless sacrifice of yourself.'

Nell made no answer. Mrs Lestrange was not afraid of her daughter being overworked, for she knew the girl's dislike to parish work; but she went home oppressed by a sense of vain sacrifice on Nell's part. The breaking off of Nell's engagement had been a bitter disappointment to her; but the fate of her other two daughters was leading her not to put much trust in bright futures, and she said not a word to Nell. Beyond the bare information that her engagement was at an end by mutual consent, Nell herself never mentioned the subject.

Mrs Lestrange's report upon Nell at this time was that she looked very well and bright, except for her eyes, which were heavy-looking. 'I dare say she cries herself to sleep, if we did but know,' said Mrs Lestrange, 'for she was very fond of Mr Neville.'

'Then why in the world'—— began Mrs Spencer, and finished off impatiently; 'I don't believe she has it in her to care for any one. I never did credit her with much heart.'

But Nell had not mentioned two facts: one, that in order to sleep she had to have recourse to sleeping-draughts the doctor gave her, a practice, however, which her good sense soon led her to abandon; the other, that her auburn hair was beginning to have streaks of white in it.

'Now I thought one of the beauties of this colour of hair was that it did not turn white till an advanced age,' she

murmured to herself, as she bent over the looking-glass one morning; 'and I can't even dye it, as I could if it were black, for I could never match the shade.'

But in her heart Nell knew why her beautiful hair was losing its bright colour. And then a queer scraping sound was heard along the passage, and her face took a bright look. It was baby Granville gyrating along by a method of his own, and making for Auntie Nell's room.

Nell would have given worlds not to have given baby this name; but it was too late to change now, so she avoided calling him by it by shortening to Gran, or saying Baby.

'Peter,' said Nell as the autumn days began to close in, 'suppose we start the boys' club again?'

Mr Paul looked up delighted. 'Up here! Would you really?' he said wistfully.

'Yes, of course,' said Nell. She was dreading the thought of the long winter evenings spent with her brother-in-law; and, to give her her due, her chief aim was to keep as many as possible of her sister's projects from falling to the ground.

'And the girls?' asked the vicar.

'And the girls,' agreed Nell. 'We may as well go the whole hog,' she added grimly.

So October saw all the old régime in full swing. But as Nell was young, and in spite of her trouble strong and healthy, the work did not hurt her, 'which proves,' she said, 'that hearts do not break nowadays.' Ten minutes later she was inclined to doubt this, for she took up the *Times* for the day, and there staring her in the face under the marriages was:

'NEVILLE—KING-SCHOLES.—On the 23rd, at St George's, Hanover Square, Granville Neville, Esq., Her Majesty's Civil Service, Resident at —, to Alice King-Scholes, widow of the late Captain King-Scholes.'

Something broke then, and Nell felt a sickening pain go through her. Mr Paul had seen the announcement, and had purposely left the paper in Nell's way.

He had not known that the engagement was broken off. In his trouble and anxiety about his children it had not occurred to him to wonder how Nell should stay on two years; and now he understood, or thought he did, that Nell had never cared for Mr Neville, and had jumped at an excuse for breaking the engagement off. He was confirmed in this opinion by Nell's unchanged appearance that day, for, after the first pang, a dull pain which showed no outward sign of its presence was all that remained to remind Nell of that morning's shock.

'Well,' said Nell, with the queer habit she had of consoling herself, 'one good thing is that every one will know now, and I sha'n't have to write round telling them that I am to be a lone spinster for life; and another good thing is that mother will not urge me to come home at present. London is not the place for me now.'

Then she went singing down the stairs, but stopped abruptly as she found herself trilling out the words:

Oh, my love, I love you so!

My love, that loved me long ago.

'Hardly appropriate,' she said to herself; but smiled on.

Only one person in the village took in the *Times*. He, seeing his own name, read the notice and understood; and his heart was sore for Nell and hot against the other man. But he said nothing, so Nell escaped village comment again, thanks to Will Neville; only this time she knew it, for she called at old Mrs Seaman's and found her lamenting that Will had not sent the *Times* as usual. 'So unlike his usual thoughtfulness,' she said.

‘I’ll fetch it,’ said Miss Nesbit briskly. ‘I did not know you wanted it.—Now, the *Daily Mail*’s good enough for me,’ she said; ‘but granny there doesn’t like the *Mail*. “Nothing like the *Times*,” she says.’

Presently Miss Nesbit returned.

‘He’s only given me half. He seemed all of a fluster when I asked for it; said he had not finished with the first page. Still, that’s only advertisements, so it does not matter.’

‘And the births, deaths, and marriages.’

Miss Nesbit laughed, ‘And the births, deaths, and marriages,’ she assented. ‘I forgot you always like to read those. Ah! there goes Will home, and I believe he has got the paper under his arm. I’ll call to him.’

All this time Nell sat there with her heart beat, beating till she felt as if it were coming into her throat, and would choke her, and her courage screwed up ready to answer the inevitable question when that announcement was read out.

‘Will! Will!’ cried Miss Nesbit, ‘Mrs Seaman says you have kept the best part. She wants the first page—the births, deaths, and marriages.’

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ said young Will; ‘but I’ve burnt it, and I want this advertisement sheet, if you don’t mind. I’ll send you the whole paper to-morrow, never fear.’

Nell breathed freely, and she was surprised at the glow which she felt at the protective action of the young man.

‘There now, Mrs Seaman,’ she said, ‘I’ll read you a lot out of my own head. It will do just as well, and you would not know any of the people in to-day’s *Times*, so it won’t make any difference.’ Nell proceeded to make up a number of births and marriages of village people mixed with the aristocracy, till the two ladies were in fits of laughter, and forgot all about the missing *Times*.

‘And now your own, Miss Nell,’ said blind Mrs Seaman. ‘Neville—Lestrange.’

Nell shivered. ‘Don’t,’ she said ; then getting up abruptly and laughing hysterically, she said good-bye and went.

‘Dear me, how thoughtless of me ! Of course it has had to be put off. I forgot that,’ said the old lady, much disturbed. Miss Nesbit said nothing ; she smelt a rat, as the vulgar saying is ; but she was quite friendly with Nell, and she held her peace.

But Nell stopped as she passed Mr William Neville, and, obeying an impulse she could not help, said simply, as she held out her hand, ‘Thank you.’

‘Oh, all right !’ he said gruffly. ‘I say, Miss Nell, you don’t mind my calling you so—do you ?’

Nell only laughed. ‘It’s Barton fashion,’ she remarked. ‘I am almost forgetting my surname. Well, what do you say ?’

‘Well, it’s rather cheeky of me, I dare say ; but I do hope you won’t overdo it. I hear that you are starting that boys’ club, and goodness knows what hen conventions besides.’

‘Oh, I sha’n’t overdo it,’ she said lightly. ‘It’s a mercy to have the winter evenings filled in, and I don’t do much parish visiting, except to some sick people.’

‘It seems so odd for you, somehow,’ said young Will, ‘to be doing this sort of thing. It’s not really your style.’

‘It’s an odd world, Mr Will,’ said Nell. ‘I don’t mind telling you that if it were not for those two lonely little boys I don’t think I could stand it. However, it appears to be my work for the next’—Nell stopped, pressed her lips together and finished up—‘for ever.’ After which, unable to stand the sympathy in young Will’s eyes, she nodded and continued her way with a smile on her lips and an ache in her heart.

Mr Paul, who happened to be in his groom's cottage, which stood at the Vicarage gates, saw her pass with that smile on her lips, and it moved him as he was saying good-night to her to add, by way of congratulation, 'It is a great blessing when one finds out one's mistake before it is too late, Nell.'

'Yes,' replied Nell, 'and it is a still greater blessing to make the best of one's mistakes when one finds them out too late.'

The point of which remark the Reverend Peter Paul naturally failed to see.

Nell went off to bed, demanding of herself why she was living, and laughing as if—as if there were anything to live for. And the real answer, that she was just now living for others and even already reaping the reward, never occurred to her. Basilia Paul had not lived in vain. All through her life, and especially at any great crisis, Nell found herself involuntarily thinking to herself what would Basil do, and being guided by it. In her present uncongenial work she was only sustained by her dead sister's example, and by the desire to carry out, as far as in her power, the plans Mrs Paul had so enthusiastically unfolded to her since her arrival at Barton. For Nell, in spite of her religious bringing up and religious surroundings, had no real religious feeling to guide. It had never occurred to her to question the doctrines of the Church in which she had been brought up; but, except as a matter of form, it is doubtful if she had ever prayed; and this, however shocking it may sound, and however much one may feel inclined to combat it, is not such an uncommon thing as at first appears. Numbers—the majority—of people go through the world in the jog-trot groove into which they happen to be placed. They accept the position in which they find themselves, and with it the code of

opinions on religious, political, and social matters which obtains in that groove; and unless some great upheaval comes in their lives, and shakes them out of it, they generally remain placidly in it; and if a disquieting thought as to its absolute rightness occurs, it is dismissed. Thinking for one's self gives a great deal of trouble, and the majority shirk it; and who is to say that they are not wise in their generation?

CHAPTER XX.

NELL'S ESSAY TO RAISE THE MASSES.



LOOK here, Nell,' said Mr Paul one morning at breakfast, as he sat with wrinkled brow regarding a letter which he had just received, 'here's a dividend of ten pounds to be spent on the village library.'

'Well,' said Nell cheerfully, 'I don't see what call you have to worry over that. I'll soon spend it for you.'

'Yes, I dare say you would ; but we have to spend it before the end of this year. It is an old charity, and the books must be suitable to a village library. How on earth am I, or you either for that matter, to find ten pounds' worth of books which come under that category?'

'Leave it to me,' said Nell airily. 'I'll spend it, and more too, on books.'

'Yes, I don't doubt it,' said Mr Paul ungratefully ; 'but what kind of books will they be? Judging by the heterogeneous nature of your own reading, I should be sorry for the villagers to be left to your discretion for their literature. If you do undertake to get these books you must show me your list before you send for the books.'

'All right,' said Nell ; 'but you need not be afraid. I badly want to elevate the masses by good literature, and now is my chance.'

'Elevate the masses?' questioned the Reverend Mr Paul

with wrinkled brow. 'This is for the villagers of Barton. You must not spend it on the East End, or anything of that sort.'

'Goodness me, Peter!' cried Nell, 'how can I talk to you when you will take everything so literally? It is the villagers I mean. I believe if they had interesting books to talk about they would not talk so much gossip, and so I have been thinking of starting a literary society. Something of the sort was talked of last winter, you know.' Mr Paul sighed assent, and Nell continued: 'I thought we would meet once a week and read or discuss some book, or read a play of Shakespeare.'

'You don't imagine the villagers will care about Shakespeare?'

'The middle-class ones, such as compose the tennis club, will; and the lower class will read books of adventure and travel, and so on.'

'Well, I wish you all success, and will help you with pleasure,' said Mr Paul; 'but if you succeed in stopping one woman's tongue in Barton or elsewhere you will have accomplished a miracle.'

'Peter Paul,' said Nell with mock severity, 'you astonish me—you do indeed. I would not have credited you with such unchivalrous sentiments.'

'You can't expect me to feel chivalrous to gossips,' said Mr Paul, as he went off to his study.

'What's a gossip, Auntie Nell?' asked little Mansfield after his father had gone.

'A person that talks about other people, Mansfield.'

'Then, everybody's a gossip. So are you, Auntie Nell,' said the little fellow with astonishment.

'True for you, sonny; but we only call it gossip when

other people talk like that, not when we do so ourselves,' said Nell, as she took him on her shoulders and danced round the room ; while the baby—who always came down to breakfast, and ate his bread-and-milk in solemn state, when he was not surreptitiously throwing it under the table on his 'slack' days—banged his spoon on the table and crowed with delight.

Nell, having romped with little Mansfield, and tried to bring a little colour into his cheeks and a little brightness into his sober little self, went off first to give cook orders for the day and then to do some 'parishing,' as she called it.

One secret of the ease with which Nell got through her manifold duties was her quickness. Her housekeeping was a marvel in rapidity.

'Give us artichoke soup, not too highly seasoned because of the children, and cold beef, a milk pudding, and baked apples for lunch ; fried sole, mutton cutlets, stewed pears, with custard and a cheese soufflé for dinner ; and some mushrooms and scrambled eggs for breakfast. Oh ! and you might make us scones for nursery tea' (which she generally managed to join) ; and off she was, to fly round the house, look into cupboards, and make cheery comments on her work to the housemaid. Mr Paul had long since abandoned all efforts to follow Nell's swift movements of mind and body.

To-day Nell was extra busy sending out invitations for the first meeting of her literary society, and choosing books for the library.

Mr Paul's brow was a mass of wrinkles over the list.

Kingsley's books passed with approbation ; but they were almost the only ones.

'*Darwin's Voyages*. They won't understand this, Nell.'

'Yes they will,' argued Nell. 'They are like a novel.'

'Are they?' said Mr Paul drily, who was no Darwinite. '*Origin of Species*. This is absurd, Nell; besides, I don't altogether care about it.'

'My dear Peter! it is the book of the century,' remonstrated Nell.

'Oh, nonsense,' said Mr Paul; but he gave in. '*The Woman*—I won't have this.' He determinedly put his pen through that book. 'Ten of Miss Braddon's and ten of Mrs Henry Wood's novels. Why, you are going to flood the place with pernicious literature, rubbishy fiction,' cried Mr Paul in dismay.

'You must give them novels, and those at least have a good tone,' said Nell.

'Tennyson, Browning, Byron, Shakespeare, Dante.' Mr Paul put down the list. 'I'll tell you what, Nell,' he said, as if a brilliant inspiration had struck him, 'let's send for the hundred best books, and have done with it. No one can blame us then; and—and—I don't like this list of yours.'

'I don't do things so as to escape blame,' said Nell loftily, and she certainly spoke the truth.

However, eventually a compromise was made, and a good many of Nell's books were bought; but the result was not altogether satisfactory, though the books were mostly read. Nell officiated as librarian, and generally chose the books for the applicants; but sometimes her choice was severely criticised.

'Mother she says she don't care nothin' about love tales. She do want a good book with a deathbed in it, she do.' Or, 'Father he do say if I do read these here wild tales I shall be a wantin' to run away to sea, or some'at; and he don't hold with this here library of yours, Miss Nell.' But worse was to come. One of the boys of the club suddenly gave up

going to church; and not only that, but his example was followed by his aged father, who had been a most regular churchgoer.

Mr Paul was lamenting over their absence to Nell.

'Why don't you go and have a talk with the father? I dare say it's some nonsense they've got into their heads about that new Cross of yours on the altar.'

Mr Paul went, and came back in what, in any other man, would be called a bad temper; but in him it took the form of dejection and an aggrieved air.

'It's not my Cross, Nell,' he said gloomily; 'it's you.'

'Me?' said Nell ungrammatically. 'How on earth, pray?'

'It appears that young Mather has been reading the *Descent of Man*; and when I asked what that had to do with his not coming to church, he looked at me as if he had found me out at last, and said, "What's the use, when we're all descended from monkeys?"'

Nell laughed, and continued to laugh till the tears ran down her cheeks; but Mr Paul could see no cause for merriment, and did not unwrinkle his forehead. And as Nell declined to discuss the matter with becoming gravity, Mr Paul walked off in high dudgeon, after announcing his intention of 'withdrawing the *Descent of Man* from the library.' If the Reverend Mr Paul could have had his way he would have shut up the library forthwith; for, being one of the most amiable of men, it was pain and grief to him to run counter to public opinion. Let him once see that a certain course of action was right, and he might be trusted to take that course, however disagreeable it might be, and however unpleasant the consequences.

Meanwhile Nell, with perhaps a little less confidence,

proceeded with her dissemination of literature. As a net result the boys of the village read tales of adventure which inspired some of them with a desire to go to sea or enlist; the girls read a few novels; and some genteel poor people, who could not afford a subscription, read up-to-date books, and perhaps this putting of an extra pleasure into their colourless lives was the greatest good that Nell's library effected.

And the literary society? As regards members it was a great success, and they certainly enjoyed themselves. Perhaps the literary night was the happiest evening of the week at Barton Vicarage. The vicar came in and read Shakespeare, and he did this well. He was a well-educated man, had made the grand tour, and was decidedly cultivated, though he seldom read now, for his circumscribed life was having the narrowing effect on him that it has upon so many country clergymen. Still, as he was the son of wealthy parents, he had had all the advantages wealth brings, among which is the means of cultivating the taste. If some of the members found Shakespeare, even as read in the vicar's musical voice, dull, others were well able to appreciate it; and the delicious coffee and cakes from Buzzard's were unanimously approved of. The half-hour for refreshments meant a buzz of conversation, during which Mr Paul got a good deal of parish drudgery taken off his hands by one or another of the literary members.

So far so good; but the main aim and object of the society—which young Will declared she ought to call the 'society for the suppression of scandal'—was to 'elevate the masses,' a most inappropriate name for the middle-class members. Nell was falling into the way of making a confidant of young Will on the subject of parish matters. He knew all the

people, and his advice was always sound if he had not a very exalted ideal.

‘You won’t do it, Miss Nell. You might just as well try and drain the sea as stop the tongues of the old women here.’

‘I don’t expect to do that. I only want to give them something pleasant to say.’

‘I don’t want to discourage you; but if you make one woman abstain from scandal for one week, well, you will have worked a miracle.’

‘Why, that is exactly what my brother says. You men are all alike. I’m disgusted with you. I suppose you are judging others by yourselves. I have heard that at men’s clubs they do nothing else but talk scandal. At any rate, the Bartonites are talking about Shakespeare and the literary society just now, and they can’t make any scandal out of that.’

‘I would not be too sure,’ said Will significantly, as he picked off bits of twigs and threw them away—they were conversing in Mrs Seaman’s garden. ‘I expect they have pulled Shakespeare to pieces by now, and are looking for further reputations to demolish.’

‘That won’t hurt Shakespeare,’ said Nell; ‘and they can go on to his characters next.’

‘Let us hope so,’ said Mr William Neville. ‘At any rate, your example will do good, and the tone you give has made a difference already.’

‘Oh, nonsense,’ said Nell. ‘I like a little gossip as well as any one.’

‘Yes; but not slander. However, talking of slander, who do you think I heard swearing like a trooper this morning?’

‘How can I tell? I should not be surprised at any one

except the vicar. That is one blessing living in a vicarage, you never hear bad words there. Old army men are awful when they think there are no women about. Who was it, and why am I expected to listen to his delinquencies ?'

'Because it was in the Vicarage I heard the bad words,' said Will, with a twinkle in his eye, 'and the offender was your small nephew Mansfield.'

'Mansfield ! Oh, Will, how dreadful ! What would Basil say ?' cried Nell, in her great distress using Mr Neville's Christian name without an affix. She feared she had neglected the little fellow, for Nell had a feverish anxiety not to let the little boys miss their mother more than was inevitable.

'Now, I would not have told you if I had thought you would have taken it like this. It is the commonest thing in the world. They simply repeat words they hear.'

'But that's the point : where could he hear such words ?'

'From the gardening boy, whose ears I took the liberty of boxing. I think if I were you I would get rid of him. There's an awfully nice boy in my club ; you might have him safely. I hope you don't mind my telling you ?'

Nell's eyes answered him. Her eyes were her best point, some people thought, and they certainly were capable of a marvellous amount of expression.

Without Nell being aware of it, Mr William Neville kept a watch over her. He it was who vetoed more theatricals when the villagers wanted it, because he knew that though Nell could not act she would have to be stage-manager, and he saw she had enough on her hands already. And many a time when the vicar, with whom he was a great friend, would say, 'I must get Nell to do that,' or 'Nell will see about so and so,' Will would hastily interpose and either offer

to do it himself or deprecate Nell being burdened with more duty.

'Oh, Nell likes it. The more she has to do the brighter and happier she seems.'

'Yes; but this would be the last straw,' Mr Neville would remonstrate. 'Let some one else do it. I believe Miss Nell has been having neuralgia lately, and that is a sure sign of overwork.'

The vicar would say no more, but he did not altogether like the interference; nor on reflection did he relish the thought that Nell had had neuralgia without telling him, but making a confidant of Will Neville. One day at lunch he taxed Nell with it.

'Nell, have you been having neuralgia?' he demanded.

'Me?' cried Nell, colouring. It struck Mr Paul that Nell had considerably less colour, as a rule, than she used to have.

'Yes, you.'

'Oh yes; but it is not as bad as it might be. How did you know?'

'Young Will told me.'

'Young Will! How on earth did he know? I have never mentioned it to a soul.'

'How extraordinary!' said the vicar. 'Perhaps you told the children?'

'What?' said Mansfield.

'Oh dear, no. Talking about neuralgia is fatal; it always makes it worse.'

The explanation was simple. Will Neville had noticed that Nell was not quite so bright as usual, and once or twice she rested her head on her hand, and her brows had contracted with pain for a moment; and he had drawn his own conclusions.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LITERARY SOCIETY.



T had occasionally struck Nell as a remarkable coincidence that she often met young Will Neville at the same spot just under the churchyard wall, where it bulged to enclose two lovely old trees. If the road had not taken a curve just there, which hid the long village street from the Nevilles' house, Nell would have suspected him of coming out when he saw her returning; but as she could not see the house from the street, she concluded that it was a coincidence. In this, however, she was wrong, for Mr William Neville had a workshop—of the existence of which Nell was ignorant—at the end of the garden, and through a tiny window in the back of it he could see every one who came up the road. Consequently, when he saw Nell in the distance he hastily washed his hands, changed his coat, and sauntered off towards his office, his excuse being that he had something to say to her. This was his normal condition; and Nell did not object, as his remarks were usually pleasant ones, and she generally found a good deal to say in return.

On this particular morning, as young Will saw from his coign of vantage the figure which was the centre of his world and his thoughts, he put down his carpentering tools with an air of a man who had something unpleasant to say, and meant to say it; and as he thrust his arms into his coat-

sleeves he appeared to be working himself up into a state of great indignation. Probably he felt that this would help him in the coming interview. But when he came upon Nell, and her smiling face (with its halo of bronze hair looking like burnished gold where the sun touched it) brightened as she saw him, all his armour fell from him, and he smiled back at her.

‘Oh,’ he said weakly, ‘I wanted to see you to say something to you.’

‘Say on, Macduff!’ said Nell.

‘That is just what I wanted to speak to you about,’ said Mr Neville.

‘Macduff?’ queried Nell. ‘Well, as I said before, speak on. I should like to hear you discourse on the gentleman. My acquaintance with his history is of the slightest.’

‘Macduff be hanged!’ irritably said young Will, who apparently found what he had to say very difficult. ‘I know no more about him than yourself, and don’t want to.’

‘Then we are agreed for once,’ said Nell, ‘for I don’t yearn to talk about Macduff; but I understood that you did. At least that was the meaning your words conveyed to me. Who do you want to speak about: Shakespeare perhaps?’

‘Shakespeare can be hanged too for aught I care. It’s you I want to talk about.’

‘Oh,’ said Nell, ‘why didn’t you say so at first, instead of pretending it was Macduff?’

‘Look here, Miss Nell,’ said young Will determinedly, ‘I am only a plain fellow, and I can’t make fine speeches and put things as you do; but I know what I want to say, and it’s this: that literary society of yours is a simple fraud.’

‘As how?’ said Nell.

‘I thought it was started for the sole purpose of suppressing gossip.’

‘And elevating the masses,’ added Nell.

‘Well, if abusing me hard, and spreading false tales about me is a sign of elevation, your members are very elevated. Otherwise, I don’t see any signs.’

‘Now, what’s the matter? I thought it was I; but it is apparently the literary society or yourself you want to talk about,’ said Nell. ‘What have you been doing?’

Mr Will was aghast at Miss Nell thus carrying the war into the enemy’s camp. ‘Well,’ he cried, ‘I like that. I did not say that I had been doing anything. I’m talking about your beastly literary—— Oh, I beg your pardon; but it’s enough to make any fellow swear.’

‘I *am* talking about what you have been doing. You must have been doing something to make yourself more interesting than Shakespeare; and if you go thwarting my best efforts, and listening to scandal, as you have been doing, on your own showing, instead of joining the society as you ought to have done, you must not expect me to be sympathetic,’ said Nell, for pure love of teasing.

‘So it seems,’ said Will in disgust. ‘Wait till your precious literary society—save the mark!—takes you in hand. Good-morning, Miss Lestrangle.’

Nell looked after him with a wicked smile on her face. ‘Poor fellow! it was too bad to tease him. What have those wretched women been saying now? It can’t be about his father again, for that has died out; and I don’t believe there is any harm in him at all.’

‘Oh, Nell, come in here!’ cried her brother-in-law, who was sitting in his study hard at work on parish accounts, as Nell came in at the door. ‘I want to speak to you about something.’

‘I hope it’s no scandal,’ said Nell.

'I'm afraid it is,' said Mr Paul with wrinkled brow. 'It's about young Will.'

'I sha'n't believe a word against that young man,' said Nell; 'so don't expect me to.'

Mr Paul looked at her, an old suspicion rising in his mind. 'I don't believe it myself, and I am at present engaged in proving his innocence. You know he is treasurer to the boys' club. I made him so on purpose to show that I would not be influenced by that unfortunate mistake of his father's; and a story has been spread about that he has not kept the accounts properly.'

'Accounts! What accounts? I thought the boys only gave a halfpenny a week?'

'So they do. They have only subscribed about ten shillings altogether; but it is declared the sum of two shillings is gone.'

'Of all the idiotic charges, that is the most idiotic. Do they imagine Mr Will has embezzled two shillings; and why, pray? He has spent some money for them—hasn't he?'

'That's just it. He sent for some games from London, from Whiteley's, and he did not show the bills when I asked him. He said they were at home or lost; but he'd put down what they cost, and he sent in the account, which, as I say, leaves two shillings unaccounted for.'

'Well, ask him to pay the two shillings, which he has forgotten to return.'

'That's not the point exactly. His account is all wrong at any rate, for we sent for some more games at the same price, and Whiteley wrote back saying they did not sell any at that price; they were either less or a good deal more.'

'He simply made a mistake,' said Nell impatiently. 'Why don't you tell the wretched boys so, and shut them up?'

'It's not the boys, unfortunately; they know nothing about it, and are his staunch allies. It is some of the ladies of the parish, who go looking at the account-book and the games; and'—here Mr Paul looked half-vexed, half-amused—'it appears the gossip was hatched at the literary society.'

'Impossible!' said Nell. 'They wouldn't dare, with me in the room.'

'They did; because I took the trouble to trace the story to its origin, and it was spoken of there. I'd go to Will about it; but he is so touchy. I wonder if you could manage it?'

Suppressing a desire to call him a coward, Nell agreed, and Mr William himself was rejoiced by an invitation to tea at the Vicarage that afternoon, for which Mr Paul took care not to be at home. So Nell and her two small nephews received him.

'I forgot to say that your presence was desired, *if* you had recovered your temper.'

'I'm sorry I lost it,' said Will, who was as amiable as ever, as far as Nell was concerned, though his face was a little clouded.—'Hullo, baby, how are you?—I never saw such a beautiful boy, Miss Nell. He's got your eyes too,' Will wound up lamely.

'Yes, I'se a booful boy,' said the little fellow, beaming. He had not the slightest idea what he was saying; but he had heard it so often he felt it was the right thing to say.

Nell laughed as she fed him with rusks, and placidly mopped up the milk he was deliberately spilling on her dress.

When he had played with Mr Will's watch, and Mansfield had been promised a ride on his hunter without any one holding on—a very rash promise—the children went away, and Nell began :

‘Now, what’s this charge you have to bring against my literary society?’

‘They have brought a charge against me, a charge of embezzling two shillings. They evidently think it’s hereditary,’ he added bitterly.

‘Why don’t you show the bills, and have done with it?’ said Nell, when he had told her the story she had already heard from Mr Paul.

‘Because I don’t want to,’ said he; ‘and you can believe the same twopence-halfpenny charge if you like.’

‘I believe you have got the bills now. Don’t be tiresome. Give them to me, or I shall come and search the office, and make hay with your papers.’

‘You won’t find them there,’ said Mr Will, smiling. ‘They are in my pocket, and there they will remain unless you choose to rifle it. I’ll make no explanation to any one. I was a fool to touch their halfpennies.’

Nell considered. Young Will was a most obstinate young man, and he evidently did not mean to produce the bills, which unless she was mistaken were in the pocket-book which was sticking out of his coat-pocket. Suddenly Nell rose from her seat, and, making a swift movement, snatched the pocket-book.

‘Miss Nell! Give it back, please; give it back at once,’ he cried. ‘I’ll give you the bills if you return that without opening it.’ William Neville was quite excited; and Nell, having gained her point, returned it with passing wonder at his excitement. A look through the pocket-book, which was also a diary, would have enlightened her upon his excitement.

With evident relief, Mr Neville received his property back; and, taking out a couple of bills, handed them to Nell, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Nell glanced at them and then at the total, seventeen shillings. 'Why, you put down seven shillings. Now, you see what comes of being untruthful. It serves you right. I shall have these accounts published in the magazine, and your duplicity will be exposed. But don't say anything to any one. I want to have my revenge on the literary society.' Nell sighed. 'I'm afraid, Mr Will, that a woman's tongue is past elevating.'

'Except in a rage,' suggested Will.

'Anyway, I have failed,' said Nell with dejection.

"He higher shoots who aims the sky than he who aims a tree," quoted Will. 'Never say die.'

'I'll give them a piece of my mind first,' said Nell grimly. 'Let us hope they will find that elevating.'

The next literary evening arrived. The vicar was kind and friendly as ever. Nell was all that politeness required; but there was an oppressiveness in her courtesy, and every one felt that Miss Nell was not herself.

The reading went on as usual, and at nine o'clock the coffee and cakes, which were such an attraction to some of the girls, were brought in.

The subject of charity was brought up, and some princely donation to a good object was spoken of.

'I always pity those people,' said Nell, as she played with her coffee.

'You do look at things so queerly, Miss Nell,' said a girl. 'Why should you pity them? You don't mean because they have so much money less?'

'That is the one thing I do not pity them for. No, what always makes me sorry, when I see these things in the papers, is the thought that these people spoil a good deed by blazoning it abroad.'

‘I don’t see why they should not. It shows a good example.’

‘But we happen to be told not to let our right hand know what our left hand is doing,’ observed Nell.

‘Well, I like to know of a good action,’ persisted the girl, who had an idea that Nell was hitting at her because her gift of alms-bags had been put in the parish magazine.

‘Do you?’ said Nell. ‘Then I’ll tell you of one I heard of to-day. You remember the boys’ club we started some time ago? It is supposed to be self-supporting, and it is better for the boys to think so—gives them self-respect. They give a halfpenny a week, and with these halfpennies they imagine they can do wonders. Among other things they wanted a lot of games, so their honorary treasurer quietly took down their orders, which came to seventeen shillings, got the games, suppressed the bills, and sent in the account for seven shillings.’

‘Did he really?’ said the vicar with delight. ‘I’m so glad; it is just like him. I knew’—— Then the vicar stopped.

Nothing could have pointed the story better than this spontaneous remark of Mr Paul’s. He was evidently not in the secret, and there were two or three members of the literary society who wished the floor would open and swallow them up. This being out of the question, they swallowed their coffee, only wishing that the cups were twice as large, and would cover their faces. And more than one smiled.

But among the company was an old lady, William Neville’s greatest enemy, and of whom he had once said that he should never be safe to go anywhere while she had a tongue to speak or a pen to write of him. She had been a great loser by his father, and carried her resentment so far as

to refuse to put her money into the bag in church if he held it ; but now she set down her cup with a hand that slightly trembled, and her colour deepened as she said loud enough for every one to hear, 'I suppose you are talking of William Neville? It was very nice of him, for he has not too much money. I believe him to be a very honourable young man.'

And Nell's eyes were shining suspiciously as she smiled.

Then the vicar relieved the situation by likewise putting down his cup, and saying, 'I must pitch into Will. He ought to have told me at least. He knows what this place is.' And then the poor man looked so horrified at his malapropos remark that Nell gave way to hopelessly open mirth. Her laugh, as usual, was infectious, and every one, the culprit included, joined in the laugh.

So Mrs Bicknell no longer hurt Will's feelings by passing the box or bag, and Will was the first to benefit by Nell's 'society for the suppression of scandal.'

CHAPTER XXII.

A DISASTROUS DRIVE.



AFTER it became known that Nell had taken up her abode at Barton Vicarage most of the people round, who had called when the Pauls first came to Barton, repeated their visits, and Nell, unwillingly, was dragged by her brother to return these calls.

‘If there’s one kind of woman I dislike more than the average country parson’s wife and daughters, it is the average country squire’s wife,’ said Nell, as she drove along a dull country road to repay some of these calls, accompanied by Mr Paul. ‘They are that patronising and stodgy.’

‘What nonsense, Nell!’ expostulated her brother. ‘Why, your best friends are clergymen’s and squire’s wives and daughters.’

‘They,’ observed Nell, ‘are not average wives and daughters at all. I’m talking of people like this uninteresting person we are going to see this afternoon, who will talk of nothing but her mothers’ meeting and the difficulties they have with the Dissenters in the parish.’

‘Well, that is a great trial, and I shall be able to sympathise with her; besides, I think your conversation this morning at breakfast was chiefly complaint against the Dissenters for starting a girls’ club the same night as yours, and trying to get your girls away.’

‘Yes, the wretches!’ said Nell. ‘I don’t mind their having a club; but to go and try to take away my girls. Oh, well,’ as she saw her brother’s face, ‘that just shows that I’m getting as bad as the rest of you. Here, Peter! where are you driving to? I thought we were going to Grattenchester.’

‘Goodness me! So I was; but Tommy evidently has decided otherwise.’ The wily pony had taken advantage of Mr Paul’s inattention to turn off from the main road, and was trotting happily down a byway which would take them by a slight detour home again. ‘Turn round, Tommy; turn round at once.’ Mr Paul tugged hard at the reins; but Tommy was not going to give up his way without a struggle, and after turning round and round began to rear.

‘If you are going to have a circus exhibition,’ said Nell, ‘I’m going to get out. My life’s valuable, and it is not insured.’

‘Sit still, Nell,’ said her brother with authority; but Nell would not. She really was slightly nervous, for her brother-in-law was a notoriously bad whip; and, just as Tommy had reared so that it seemed as if he never would come down, Nell tried to get out, meaning to go to the pony’s head. The carriage was very low, and one foot was on the ground and the other on the step when the pony descended, and with a spring was off trying to run away in his own direction. Nell was thrown violently on to the ground. Mr Paul in his efforts to stop Tommy broke one rein; and as Nell lay there she saw Tommy careering victoriously along, with Mr Paul sitting helplessly in the carriage.

But if he was wanting in moral courage, Mr Paul was no physical coward, and did not lose his head in an emergency. He had one rein left; and, seeing a high grassy bank ahead,

he pulled the rein hard and ran the little carriage upon it. As he had expected, it overturned and brought Tommy to a standstill. Mr Paul hastily secured the pony to a gate, and leaving the carriage as it was, ran as fast as he could to where Nell still lay.

‘Well done, Peter!’ was her greeting.

‘Nell, dear Nell, are you hurt?’ said her brother-in-law, who knew that Nell’s cheery remark was no evidence that she was uninjured.

‘Hurt? Bless you, no,’ said Nell. ‘Here, give me a hand.’

‘Not hurt?’ cried Mr Paul with surprise and rather an injured air. ‘Then, why on earth’——

‘Why am I on the earth? you would ask. I was so interested watching you that I forgot to get up.’

Mr Paul helped her up, observing dryly, ‘I should have thought your interest might have led you to run after me, and see if I were going to be thrown out and killed, as I might have been.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Nell judicially, ‘not out of that low carriage.’ She was feeling very shaken; but nothing would have induced her to say so. ‘I hope you don’t expect me to get in again, because I don’t see my way to do so.’

‘Not with the carriage at that angle, naturally; but I will soon right that,’ said her brother, as they walked to where Tommy stood, the picture of all a pony should be.

And he did, with some exertion, put the carriage right-side up.

‘I sha’n’t get into that thing again this afternoon,’ declared Nell. ‘How do you know the springs are not broken? And, at any rate, the rein is.’

Mr Paul gave the carriage a shake. ‘They are all right.

Get in, or just hold Tommy while I mend this rein.' And Mr Paul, with some string, managed to patch up the broken rein.

'Jump in, Nell.'

Nell sat down on the grassy bank. 'I will not,' she said obstinately. 'I don't for a moment believe that rein will hold.'

'What do you propose doing then? You can't walk home seven miles, and you certainly can't wait here a couple of hours while I fetch another conveyance to take you home.'

'I shall get into the first thing on wheels that comes along. Here it is, and one man driving. Why, it's young Will, by all that's lucky!'

Mr William Neville was soon alongside and had jumped down to investigate matters.

'Miss Nell's right, vicar. I don't believe the thing is safe. You take my dogcart and drive Miss Lestrange home, and I will walk this brute home.'

'But our visits?'

'I'm not going to pay visits all covered with mud and feeling a pulp into the bargain,' decided Nell. 'You had better accept Mr Will's offer, Peter.'

'Well, you are dirty to be sure, and so am I.—Thanks, Will. If you don't mind, I believe it would be best.'

'The vicar can't even be firm with his animals,' thought Will Neville, as he took a seat in the little pony carriage and drove slowly after them; but he liked the vicar all the better for his gentle, yielding nature. He had not got halfway home when, without any warning, a crack was heard, and Will felt himself bumped on the ground as he sat in the carriage. This was too much for Tommy's already excited

nerves, and off he set, bit in mouth. The wheel had come off; but Tommy dragged the light little carriage along as if it had been a feather's weight, Will all the while holding on to the reins with grim determination, till they came to a sharp turn, when the carriage broke completely up, and Will found himself on the ground with one leg doubled up under him and a sharp pain in it. As he tried to rise the pain became intolerable, and he sank down again helpless. 'Ah! I've broken my leg, or I'm a Dutchman.' Dragging himself out of the road to the farthest side where he could command both sides of the approaches to the angle, he lay philosophically still, waiting for assistance.

In about half-an-hour he saw a dogcart rapidly approaching.

'The doctor and his assistant,' he said, 'and in a terrific hurry. Some one must be very ill. Well, he need not stop for me; I can hold out.'

The doctor stopped as he got up to Will, and with anxious face asked, 'Are you much hurt, old fellow?' Then the assistant jumped out.

'Only a leg for you to set, doctor,' said Will cheerfully. 'Don't stop for me; go on to your case. I'm afraid it's serious by the rate you were driving.'

'Case, indeed! You are my case, and I am thankful you are alive for me to tell you so, which is more than I expected when I saw that beast of the vicar's tearing through the village, kicking the fragments of a carriage to pieces behind him.' All this time the doctor and his assistant were seeing to young Will's leg, and putting it in splints. Having assured themselves that he had no further injuries, they were considering how best to lift him into the doctor's gig when the Barton 'bus appeared at a quick trot.

'By all that's lucky,' cried the doctor, 'we must turn the

occupants out whoever they are, and put you in, Will; it will be easier than my gig. Why, it's Miss Lestrangle!

'Might have known it,' muttered the assistant.

'Why?' said Will, looking up sharply.

'Because she always thinks of the right thing to do,' was the answer. And now, as the 'bus came up to them, Nell's head appeared, her face anxiously puckered up.

'I'm all right,' cried Will cheerfully; 'but I'm afraid that's more than the carriage is. I'm most awfully sorry I made such a hash of it.'

'Oh, hang the carriage!' cried Nell, relapsing into slang in her anxiety; 'and don't be untruthful. How can you be all right with those two monsters strapping you up like that?'

They all laughed, knowing what a relief it was to a woman to scold when she is upset.

'Will and the assistant were put into the 'bus, which returned at walking pace to Barton, while Nell drove home with the doctor.

'It's certainly a blessing in disguise as far as that carriage is concerned,' remarked Nell to the doctor, 'for of all the uncomfortable conveyances I ever drove in it was the most uncomfortable.'

'I wish the pony had done away with himself too,' replied the doctor. 'A beast that shies and rears as that one does is a danger to every one else, as well as the owner.' Tommy had shied nearly into the doctor's brougham, hence his animosity.

At the gate of the drive they met the vicar.

'How is he? Where is he?' he asked anxiously; and, on being informed, he added with rather an aggrieved air, 'If you had not rushed off like that, Nell, I would have come too.'

‘Why didn’t you? I told you I was going.’

‘You were off before I had taken in what you said,’ replied her brother.

‘Well, you can go now,’ suggested Nell. ‘At the rate they were going they will not have got very far.’

But the suggestion did not recommend itself to the vicar, who turned into the doctor’s house with him, and left Nell to go home alone. This, however, was the last thing Miss Lestrangle thought of doing. No sooner had the two men left her than she turned towards the Nevilles’ house. Mr William Neville lived, as has been said, with a bachelor uncle, and Nell knew that the housekeeper was a timid, nervous person, and would very likely lose her head in this emergency, so she decided to go and see if everything was arranged for the reception of an invalid.

The days were long past since Nell had to be careful of Barton tongues. Her position now was a very different one; so she boldly rang the Nevilles’ bell. It was well for young Will’s comfort that she did, for she found the housekeeper in a state of trepidation and flutter, having done nothing.

‘Oh, Miss Lestrangle! Oh, miss! what shall I do, and however will they get him up those stairs? Oh, are you sure he is not dead?’

‘Dead? Not he. But’—with a glance at the steep, old-fashioned stairs—‘you will never get him up there. Have you no room downstairs?’

‘There’s his own sitting-room, miss; but it ain’t got no bed in it.’

‘What’s his own bed like? A small one? Well, let the groom and gardener get it down, and put it where that sofa stands now.’

In a very short time willing hands had fetched down the bed, and put it up in the sitting-room from which Nell had banished the large sofa.

‘Ha! that’s right,’ cried the doctor. ‘Miss Nell again. Talk about old heads on young shoulders.’ And he patted her shoulder in a fatherly way.

Will said nothing, but his eyes spoke for him; and Will’s old uncle, with whom Nell was a great favourite, also spoke his thanks for him.

‘Well, considering I am to blame for the accident in a way,’ said Nell, ‘and a cowardly way too, now that I come to think of it; for I coolly let Mr Will go in the carriage because I was afraid to go myself.’

‘Ah!’ interrupted young Will; ‘but you thought I was going to walk beside it. I have nothing but my own confounded laziness to thank for the misfortune.’

‘Well, we won’t quarrel as to whose fault it is,’ said Nell brightly; ‘but I shall come and see how you are to-morrow, and the vicar is coming to-night, unless you are too tired.’

But young Will scouted the idea of being tired.

And so it came about that Nell was thrown more into young Will’s society, and the vicar wrinkled his brow in vain efforts to find some way to prevent it. The thought of Nell’s marriage became more and more distasteful—nay, out of the question. At last he blundered upon the idea of having it out with Nell. So that evening, after he had been to pay young Will a short visit, he observed, with his forehead wrinkled and his air dejected, ‘Will seemed very cheerful to-night. He said it was worth breaking his leg to have you take so much trouble for him.’

‘Did he?’ remarked Nell. ‘Then he is a foolish young man.’

Mr Paul looked relieved. 'You mean that?' Here he laughed. 'You don't mean anything?'

Nell blazed up with some of her old passion.

'Mean anything? What do *you* mean? I should have thought my going out of my way to be kind was proof enough that I did not mean anything. Good gracious! I don't believe any one else in the place would dare to hint at such a thing even.'

'I really don't mean anything either, Nell,' said her brother meekly; 'only you know he is hopelessly in love with you, and as'——

'Don't, please!' broke in Nell. 'I shall never marry. I know people who say that generally do marry; but you may believe me this time.'

'Oh, Nell, it would be such a relief to me if I could believe that!' sighed the vicar. 'You don't know how I dread being left with these two little ones and this parish; and you manage everything so well. I had no idea I should ever have things arranged so happily for me again.'

'I am sorry I can't make you believe it; but at any rate please put Mr William Neville out of your head once and for all. He knows that I don't mean anything by my attentions. If you only knew'—— Nell broke off and laughed a mirthless laugh.

Next day Nell paid her promised visit, for it would never occur to Nell to let adverse criticism influence her in a matter of this kind. Besides, she had given her promise, and a promise was a sacred thing to Nell, which was probably why she had resented Granville Neville flinging hers back at her. And she took the opportunity of speaking plainly to Mr Will. 'Mr Will,' she said, 'we are good friends—are we not?'

‘Staunch, Miss Nell,’ he replied, turning to look at her.

‘Well, I want a friend badly, so I come to you. Peter wanted to know last night if I meant anything by coming to see you.’

Will’s quick sympathy and unselfish nature helped him. ‘How absurd! No one else would imagine anything of the sort, especially as they think’—— He stopped short, embarrassed.

‘That I am still engaged,’ said Nell quietly. ‘And you?’

‘And I?’ he said gently. ‘I know you only mean to be kind, and I would rather have your friendship than any other woman’s love.’

‘I wish you would not,’ sighed Nell.

‘You need not,’ said young Will cheerfully. ‘I am really not unhappy, nor am I breaking my heart about it.’ And he smiled to her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NELL'S FRIENDS.



UT if the attempt at sociability described in the last chapter proved abortive, other expeditions had been more successful, and Nell had many acquaintances if not friends among the families of the neighbouring clergy and squires.

‘I do not give the name of friend to every girl I know,’ declared Nell, ‘especially when I don’t care for her.’

Mr Paul could not understand this distinction. All the neighbours round, unless they were hopelessly vulgar or undesirable, were his friends. ‘There never was such a man for friends,’ Nell complained.

‘I can’t think why you do not like So-and-so,’ Mr Paul would say to Nell, when Nell had refused some apparently cordial invitation.

‘They are too proper,’ was generally Nell’s rejoinder. ‘And they don’t like me, nor do they really want to see me.’

‘Then why on earth should they ask you?’ demanded her obtuse brother.

To which Nell would reply, ‘Why, indeed?’ If she had said what was in her mind she would have replied, ‘Because a widower with a private income and a good living is

distinctly eligible in the country in these bad times.' But Nell wisely refrained from any such remark; and she as often as not refused the invitations for herself while she accepted for her brother-in-law. He received all attentions in all innocence as an evidence of friendliness, and was horrified when about a year after his wife's death one manœuvring mother took him to task about his intentions.

'It's awful, Nell; it really is,' he said plaintively to her on this occasion. 'I had no idea—she came and talked to me, and seemed kind. And she asked about the children and the parish; and I like talking about them,' he wound up naively.

'Of course you do,' retorted Nell sarcastically. 'I have yet to meet the man who does not like talking about himself and his concerns. The only way in future, when any girl shows you any attention, will be after a few times to sit down and write to her, and ask her her intentions. You might get a form printed:

"DEAR MISS" or "MRS SO-AND-SO,"—Your attentions to me and my dear ones having become rather pronounced and noticeable to the public, I am desirous of ascertaining whether they have an object; and, if so, if that object is me, in which case I beg to say it's no go."

But Mr Paul had been in a brown study, and had only half heard Nell's harangue. 'What are you saying, Nell?' he asked. 'What nonsense are you talking now? I think you might sympathise with me in a very unpleasant dilemma instead of turning sacred feelings into ridicule.'

'For heaven's sake, Peter, don't talk sentiment about women who angle for a husband! There's no feeling there; or, if there is, it is of the most worldly, and there is certainly nothing sacred in it. I'm not going to talk sentiment

either, and I could not discuss this subject seriously. If I did'——

'Well, if you did?' demanded her brother.

'I should break down,' finished Nell brusquely. That ended the conversation, which was a very distasteful one to Nell, and which as was her wont she carried on in a light strain to cover her real feelings.

However, Nell had at least one friend in the neighbourhood, a Miss Wright. She was one of the first callers upon Nell when she came to live at Barton. 'A study in drab,' Nell called her; and it was always a puzzle to Miss Wright's numerous friends that she, one of the most conventional and orthodox of young women, should become the bosom-friend of that Miss Lestrangle.

No one had a word to say against Nell. Her steady devotion to her nephews and her really hard work in the parish extorted admiration; but almost invariably she was spoken of as 'that Miss Lestrangle.' And it is well known what ladies mean when they speak of one of their sex with the prefix 'that' before the name.

Nell was perfectly well aware that she was labelled dangerous or unorthodox by the worthy parsons' wives around, thanks chiefly to Miss Wright's naive admissions.

'I can't think, Nell, why you like me,' said Miss Wright one day.

'I might return the compliment,' replied Nell lightly.

'Oh, but that is quite different. You are so bright and attractive and amusing, and'——

'And so much liked by the clergesses round?' suggested Nell.

'Oh, I can't say that,' said Miss Wright. 'I can't think why; but they do not like you. Mrs A. actually warned me

against you the other day. She said you would not have a good influence upon me. You don't mind my telling you—do you?' as to her surprise she saw Nell's colour rise.

'Oh dear, no,' said Nell mendaciously, for she did mind. 'There is nothing so delightful as a sojourn in the palace of truth—for a short time, that is to say. The world, my dear, would not wag on so merrily if many people were so painfully truthful as you. But as we are upon the subject, I wonder why they disapprove of me? The uneasiness of the mothers when their sons come near me is ludicrous to behold.'

'I don't know,' said Miss Wright, 'unless it is that you say such odd things, and they think you are making fun of them; and then they think you don't like parish work.'

Nell laughed. 'If that is the head and rock of my offence, it is incurable. I do not like parish work; I hate and abominate it, and always shall.'

'Father says it's all the more to your credit that you do it so well. But, Nell, do tell me, why did you make friends with me?'

'My dear friend,' said Nell, 'do you really wish to know?'

'Yes, of course I do,' said Miss Wright eagerly.

'Well,' said Nell—sitting in her favourite attitude, her elbows on her knees and her chin resting between her hands, and looking at Miss Wright—'it was your hat.'

'My hat?' cried Miss Wright. 'Now, that's just like you. One thinks one is going to get a sensible answer out of you, and you turn it off with a joke. I remember the hat I wore that first day I saw you, and you had a little bit of a thing on you, rather fly away. Mrs A. thought'——

'Never mind what Mrs A. thought,' said Nell impatiently.

'How clumsy I looked beside you; and I remember

thinking how dainty you looked altogether; and the first thing you said when you knew me well enough was to ask me as a favour to burn that hat.'

'Exactly,' said Nell.

Miss Wright stared at her. 'What do you mean? You did not make friends with me to burn my hat, I suppose?'

'You suppose wrong then, for that's just what I did make friends with you for.'

'Well, really,' said Miss Wright, getting quite angry, 'I don't know whether you mean to be insulting, but you certainly are.'

'Not at all. We are at present in the palace of truth; if you don't like it, let us come out. I have had quite enough of it. But, joking apart, when I first saw you I thought to myself, "Why does that nice, interesting girl"—Miss Wright looked mollified—"wear that awful hat at that exasperating angle?" And I then and there determined to make friends with you, and burn that hat, which I did, and a good many other things too.'

'Yes,' remarked Miss Wright ruefully. 'Father was quite annoyed the other day when he heard I had given away that winter cloak because you said I looked a guy in it.'

'So you did,' asserted Nell, impenitent. 'I really could not stand it. The sight of you in that hideous cloak coming up the drive gave me the blues for the day.'

'It was red, not blue,' said Miss Wright.

Nell groaned. 'Well, it's gone anyhow, and thank goodness for small mercies!' remarked Nell.

'Yes; but I hope it will not be a cold winter, or I shall be frozen in that new jacket you made me get from town.'

'But think of the nice figure it gives you,' remonstrated Nell.

'If it gives me nothing worse I shall be thankful ; but I know the other day when I went that long drive with father in that piercing east wind I did not find my nice figure, as you call it, any consolation. My teeth were chattering and my face was blue with cold when I got to the Kinsales', and that can't have improved my appearance. And Mrs Kinsale asked me if I were wise to wear such a thin jacket.'

'Why didn't you tell them it was my doing?' suggested Nell sarcastically.

'I did,' said Miss Wright simply ; 'and'——

Nell looked at her for a moment in silence, and then, clapping her hands to her ears, cried, 'Now don't—for mercy's sake, don't—tell me what she said !'

Miss Wright looked at her in turn, and some light seemed to dawn upon her.

'I won't,' she replied.

And yet this ill-assorted couple were friends—that is to say, they took pleasure in each other's society. Perhaps Miss Wright's simple admiration for her flattered Nell, and perhaps, too, her truthfulness, though embarrassing at times, attracted her, for Nell hated shams and always declared that Mary Wright was sincere at all events, and did not say one thing to your face and another behind your back—which has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. Miss Wright's explanation of or apology for her friendship with Nell was that she was really not so flippant as she appeared, but was really good at heart ; 'and her devotion to her little nephews is beautiful to see,' she wound up.

But that she appreciated Nell at her true worth is doubtful. For instance, if she had been told that Nell was a most unselfish, self-denying character, she would have denied it in her outspoken way ; and if she had known of the sacrifice

of her own happiness which Nell had made for the sake of her dead sister's children she would have been more surprised than some of Nell's detractors round, at the bottom of whose ill-will lay an unacknowledged jealous feeling of inferiority.

'It makes me wild sometimes the way people misunderstand you, Miss Nell,' said young Will once, when Nell had been shocking some of the good ladies of Barton by some act or another; 'but it's only the women. There isn't a man who would not die for you to-morrow.'

'That's a very bad character for a woman to have, Mr Will,' replied Nell.

Though this was a gross exaggeration of young Mr Will's, it was true that the men collectively and singly took her part in any discussion on her merits and demerits, which, as Nell had sagely remarked, did not add to her popularity with her own sex.

The Kinsales especially were a great trial to Nell. Mrs Kinsale was in a chronic state of disapproval with her; and Nell said this made her say and do idiotic things. But on the whole Nell found that the parish and house occupied her time very fully, and she did not trouble herself very much about her neighbours, friendly or unfriendly.

Eleanor Lestrange was not embittered; far from it. Her trouble had, if anything, made her sweeter-natured under her surface of frivolity, as her brother, nephews, and real friends found; but it had certainly given her a distaste for society. As Mr Paul met his neighbours at various meetings he did not care whether Nell went in for society or not, provided she returned her calls. In fact, if the truth were known, he was rather relieved than otherwise when Nell found home-duties prevented her accompanying him to some houses where

he declared he was on thorns the whole time for fear she should say something dreadful.

‘Poor Mr Paul!’ the people around said. ‘How he must sometimes miss his dear wife, and what a handful he must find that sister of his.’

‘I think it is she who has the handful,’ the male would reply.

‘She would not do it if she did not like it,’ would be the woman’s retort.

‘I don’t know about that. She has a fine face.’ But this was sure to be a man; and men, as is well known, are no judges where women are concerned.

In the village Nell was universally liked by men, and by women too, with a few exceptions; and there was no one so welcome as she in a house of mourning.

Once an epidemic of measles of a violent kind visited the village, and Nell in a panic sent off the Vicarage children.

‘Even if they did not get it they would hamper us so. We should not dare to visit the people for fear of bringing home infection,’ she would say. ‘Clergymen ought not to have families.’

And when seven little children lay dead in one day, Nell went the round, saw them all as they lay in their coffins, and after putting white flowers in their little white hands, tried to comfort the sorrowing mothers.

Mr Paul tried to do it; but the sickly smell and the remembrance of his own little girl made him ill, and Nell implored him to go home.

‘Miss Nell, she don’t feel like the vicar, bless his tender heart! ’Tain’t nateral she should.’

But Nell dreamt of those little pallid figures in their snow-white shrouds many a night, and woke shivering.

‘Why is it allowed?’ she asked passionately of Will Neville, whom she met on her way home. ‘What is the good?’

And Will had no answer to make; but, looking anxiously at her, said, ‘Here, come into Miss Nesbit’s and warm yourself, and have some brandy. You may not know it; but you are trembling all over. We shall have you ill directly, and then what shall we all do?’

Nell was fain to take his advice, and a couple of spoonfuls of the unwonted stimulant sent her home slightly excited and inclined in the reaction to be lively if not absolutely jocose, until the vicar, poor man, who was in a great state of depression after the sights he had seen, could stand it no longer, but went off to his study and shut the door, a thing he seldom did, it being a signal that he was going to be specially busy, and did not want to be interrupted. Then, Nell, feeling the empty house more than she could bear, had a fit of ‘the nerves,’ which she was fain to work off by walking up and down the drive in the chilly evening air, by which piece of imprudence she caught a bad cold, which would have kept her at home any other time, but it did not prevent her from going to the pathetic funeral service held next day.

The mothers of the little dead children ever afterwards kept a warm corner in their hearts for the Miss Nell they had known, who had come and knelt beside them, and held their hands as she mingled her tears with theirs. But this was a Nell unknown to Miss Wright or to the public generally, or even to her brother-in-law with whom she had lived for nearly two years. Even little Mansfield once said—as he pharisaically walked off to church on a hot Sunday afternoon, his large prayer-book clasped in his two hands, when

Nell had cried off, and said she meant to have a sleep and wake up in time for nursery tea—‘Auntie Nell’s not a bit religious—not one bit. Me and dada is, and so’s Granville going to be; but Auntie Nell’s not a bit religious.’ And Auntie Nell laughed, and asked him if he had ever heard the story of the Pharisee and the Publican, and forthwith told it to the modern prototype of the former; but she did not relish the criticism.



'Auntie Nell's not a bit religious—not one bit.'

CHAPTER XXIV.

UNAPPRECIATED PHILANTHROPY.



DO wish, Peter, you would not insist upon being a teetotaler. It's really very trying for me,' said Nell complainingly.

'What difference can it make to you?' asked Mr Paul, as he looked up from his newspaper, which he was enjoying for half-an-hour after breakfast. Nell had just come in from giving orders for the housekeeping.

'It interferes with the housekeeping, and causes a lot of extra trouble.'

'How can it?' objected Mr Paul. 'If I wanted a lot of different kinds of wine it might give extra trouble, or if I objected to wine in puddings it might interfere with cook; but though I should prefer no wine being used, I most distinctly said when I took the pledge that I would not interfere with the use of stimulants in the house, and I don't object to your taking wine if you choose.'

'Teetotalers want much more food than winebibbers,' declared Nell.

'I don't believe it,' said her brother; 'and I am sure I have a very moderate appetite.'

'Well, I don't care,' said Nell. 'I wish you weren't a total-teetler. It makes me drink a great deal more tea and coffee than I otherwise should.'

‘I really can’t help that,’ said Mr Paul. ‘If you choose to have a cup of coffee or tea at lunch and dinner just because I do, that is your fault. I don’t ask you or insist upon you doing it. You always used to drink water or claret. Why don’t you go on doing that?’

‘How can any one with comfort go on imbibing strong liquor when they are sitting opposite to a person having “I’m a teetotaler” writ in large letters all over him?’

Mr Paul settled himself to his paper with a smile. ‘I should not have thought you were so easily influenced; but if you feel like that you had better sign the pledge yourself.’

‘Never!’ said Nell firmly.

‘Nell, at any rate, it is no good your trying to move me on this point, especially just now, for the Society for Reclaiming Inebriates has just written to ask me to take six cases here.’

‘What!’ shouted Nell. ‘Not if I know it. One of you is quite enough in the house, and as for seven’——

‘For goodness’ sake, Nell, don’t talk so loud,’ cried Mr Paul, getting up and shutting the door. ‘And I do wish you would be more careful what statements you make. Considering that I have never taken more than two glasses of wine at a time in my life, I really don’t know on what grounds you call me an inebriate.’

‘When did I ever say such a thing? Oh, of course, I did not mean that, and you should not take one up so. I only meant that seven teetotalers in the house would be certain to drive me to drink; not to mention that we have not room for them.’

‘That’s your absurd way of jumping to conclusions. I never said I was going to have them here. They are going

to be boarded out in the village, and I am only to keep an eye on them.'

'Only!' said Nell drily. 'Take you all your time, that will. Seeing that you have only two eyes, and that there are four public-houses, not one in sight of the other, and six drunkards, it seems to me you'll have your work cut out for you. You might send this problem up to some temperance paper: "A country teetotaler would like to know how he is to keep two eyes on six would-be drunkards in a village containing four public-houses in four different parts."'

'If you were to sympathise with the poor creatures who want to turn over a new leaf, and offer to find them lodgings, it would be more to the point, instead of making silly jokes upon a serious subject.'

'I will try and find rooms by all means, and I do sympathise with them; but, mind, I am not going to keep any of my eyes on any of them. I foresee that you will have to spend your time in raiding all the "pubs" in the place, and I really can't take on that job.'

'I should not think of asking you,' said Mr Paul with dignity; 'and I do not anticipate for a moment that any of them will enter a public-house here.'

'I do,' said Nell; 'but I will look out for lodgings for them. I suppose I must go the round of the total abstainers?' And she did.

The six reclaimed drunkards arrived, and remained for three months.

Mrs Lestrangle paid one of her periodical visits during their stay.

'Such a time as we are having, mother!' said Nell at dinner the first evening, after the servants had left them. 'Peter spends most of his time crawling about under the

counters of public-houses or roaming about the parish arm-in-arm with drunken men, who go along singing and shouting, followed by an interested crowd of small children. However, you need not take any notice of him while indulging in these vagaries. That much regard he has for one's feelings !'

Mr Paul turned to his mother-in-law. 'You know Nell's way of talking,' he said, 'so I need hardly explain that it is all nonsense.'

'Nonsense !' cried Nell indignantly. 'Why, Peter, you know it is perfectly true.'

'It is not true that I spend most of my time crawling under public-house counters. I have only done that twice, and then only for a few minutes.'

'Dear me, Peter !' ejaculated Mrs Lestrangle.

'Well, I suppose you are not going to deny that you walk about arm-in-arm with drunken men, nor that your boon companions on these occasions sing and otherwise conduct themselves in an unseemly way, thereby attracting a small crowd of juveniles ?'

'I am certainly not going to deny it ; but I think you might put it rather differently.'

'My dear Peter,' ejaculated Mrs Lestrangle in bewilderment, 'what are you both talking about ? This sounds very strange conduct.'

'I must admit that, as related by Nell, my actions do sound eccentric ; but if she will allow me to explain'——

'It will take all your eloquence to explain away the condition you came home in after your doing beetle under the "Black Lion" counter, and your rollicking walk with that drunken man, who in lightness of heart smashed in your hat.'

Mrs Lestrangle looked from one to the other in astonishment not unmingled with disapproval.

‘The fact is, mother,’ remarked Mr Paul, ‘that I am trying to reform some drunkards, and incidentally my duty lands me in these somewhat unpleasant predicaments.’

‘I am sure it is very praiseworthy and good of you ; but do you think it is any good crawling under counters after all your drunken parishioners, and walking home with them when they are in the state which Nell describes ?’

‘Oh, these are not my parishioners, really ; they are inebriates sent down from town’——

‘As if we had not enough of our own and to spare,’ interpolated Nell.

‘And I feel responsible for them. They come here for the avowed purpose of reforming and abstaining from intoxicants.’

‘And haunt the “pubs,”’ interrupted Nell, ‘retiring under the counter when Peter appears, from whence he has to drag them by main force, much to the detriment of his clothes.’

‘I wish, Nell, you would not interrupt,’ said Mr Paul rather testily, ‘but let me finish my story my own way. Let me see, where was I ?’

‘Under the “Black Lion” counter,’ suggested Nell wickedly.

But Mr Paul took no notice, and continued, ‘And under the circumstances, I feel it my bounden duty to help them in their resolve.’

‘So the whole village has been turned into a home for inebriates, and the hair of the entire population is standing up on end, owing to the sight of its revered pastor in such unseemly company. And one of the reformed characters is at present very ill after a three weeks’ course of incessant secret drinking.’

‘I never knew that ! Who is it, Nell ?’

‘Mr Mann ; his landlady told me. It appears his one entreaty was that you might not know, as it would disappoint you so.’

‘Poor fellow!’ said Mr Paul. ‘I must go and see him at once. I’m glad you told me, Nell.—You will excuse me running away your first evening, I know,’ to Mrs Lestrangle.

‘How good he is!’ said Mrs Lestrangle, after the vicar, leaving his dessert unfinished, had gone off post-haste to see the man.

‘Yes, not many men, especially conventional men who care for public opinion, like Peter, would do what he is doing. But, oh mother! if you had only seen him the other day coming over the fields. I saw them in the distance, and, thinking they were two drunken men, got through the hedge and hid till they had passed; and you may imagine my surprise and horror when I found one of them was poor Peter, who was being swayed to and fro by the other man, and his hat—Peter’s best top-hat—smashed in and perched rakishly on one side. Mrs Mulvaney says it’s hardly respectable.’

‘I think it is very noble and good of him,’ said Mrs Lestrangle; ‘but I fear he will never do any good with such weak creatures.’

‘Yes, it is very good of him; but do you know I think the world would be a happier place if there were no good people.’

‘My dear Nell!’ expostulated her mother, ‘you don’t mean half you say.’

‘I mean that anyhow,’ said Nell. ‘If everybody were good it would be all right; but as part are bad, and bad will remain, it would save a lot of trouble if the rest would stop trying to reform them and make up for their badness. One

could get a lot more happiness out of life if one had no conscience.'

'Not real happiness, my child,' said her mother.

'What is real happiness?' asked Nell. 'Oh, don't be good, mother dear! I'm so worn out by goodness just now.'

Mrs Lestrangle let Nell talk on. She knew it did the girl good, and got rid of a lot of effervescent irritation.

'You are looking very well,' observed Mrs Lestrangle, 'in spite of that assertion.'

'Very likely. It is internal wear. When I come to die I dare say I shall still look blooming, and you will have to have an inquest to find out the cause of death, and the verdict will be "internal wear and tear through the effort of living up to a standard of virtue to which she was not born."'

'My dear, you are very much better than you will allow. You are your own severest critic.'

Mr Paul returned some time after, in very good spirits.

'I really think he will keep straight now,' he said. 'He seemed so penitent and downcast, and so ashamed of my knowing. His landlady could not imagine where he got the intoxicant; but it appears he used to get it from the carrier, whom he met at the cross roads twice a week.'

'I call that worse than the men who went openly to the public-houses.'

'Well, I don't know. This man had the grace to be ashamed of his deed at any rate. I really think I shall have to give up the attempt, and ask the society to send their cases to some village where there is no public-house.'

'I told you four "pubs" were too much for one pair of eyes,' said Nell; 'but, thank goodness! you have come to that decision. I believe the entire aristocracy of the place

would have turned Dissenters to a man and woman, simply to have a pastor who wore a respectable hat, if you went on much longer setting the conventions at defiance as you have been doing.'

'You need not imagine my clothes have anything to do with my decision; it is simply a question of influence. I fear I am not strong enough to keep them straight,' he said humbly.

'My dear Peter,' said Nell, 'if any human power could keep them straight, love for you would do it. And you can't tell how the remembrance of what you have done for them may remain with them, and work more in your absence than it has done so far.'

'We will only hope and pray that it may,' sighed Mr Paul.

Years afterwards, Mr Paul had the gratification of realising the truth of Nell's prophecy. Of the six inebriates, three became reformed and did well; they were the two Mr Paul had dragged from under the counter of the 'Black Lion,' and the secret drinker. And their letters, though none of them had had any intercourse with each other or with Mr Paul since they had been at Barton, were but an echo of each other. In each case the dominant influence had been the memory of what the vicar of Barton had done for them.

'When I thought of how you, a gentleman, came after me, a humbling yourself in the dust under that counter and in the eyes of all the Barton people, I felt as if I couldn't let all that go for nothing; and so often as I passed a "pub," till I got over the craving, I used to say to myself, "If Mr Paul were here he would come after you, and drag you out of this." And I used to pretend as you were there a-pulling of me past the house; and now, thank God! I have not

touched a drop for five years, and my wife she says I am to write and thank you for her and myself, and say God bless you!' So wrote one man, and the other two wrote in much the same strain.

Mr Paul thought of Nell when he received the letters, and for the moment wished she could see them.

Mrs Lestrangle privately wondered at Nell and the way she seemed to have fallen into the groove her sister had made. The institute was built now, and the Vicarage was no longer invaded by the clubs; but there was another invader upon whom Mrs Lestrangle looked with great suspicion.

Young Mr William Neville, generally at Mr Paul's request, was constantly at the Vicarage; and though he usually spent his time in the study while Mrs Lestrangle was there, the latter had shrewd suspicions, judging from his air of 'at homeness' with Nell, that this was not always the case. And yet if he had been in a little better position! What a nice young man he was, thought Mrs Lestrangle, who was won like every one else by the simple, warm-hearted, manly character of the young man. But as a match for Nell he was impossible. However, Mrs Lestrangle knew Nell, and after a week or so she felt reassured. Nell was not in the least in love with Mr Neville; and, being Nell, it went without saying that she would not, therefore, marry him.

Mrs Lestrangle sighed. The life that Nell was leading was not the one her mother would have chosen for her; but it seemed to be the only way out of the difficulty for Mr Paul and his boys; and, as Nell had chosen it, there was nothing to be said. Moreover, a few months with Julia had convinced Mrs Lestrangle that her younger daughter had not greatly overstated the case when she said that there was no house big

enough to hold them both. Her mother, whom Julia did love, found it was not easy to get on with her; therefore Mrs Lestrangle feared to contemplate what she would be to Nell, whom she did not love.

So, for the present, things seemed best as they were; and Mrs Lestrangle trusted that time would bring some solution of the situation, which at best could be but temporary. At any rate, it was no use looking forward when the future appeared to be a blank as far as her two daughters were concerned; and though the mother's loving eyes thought Nell's face had sharper angles and her eyes less twinkle in them, she was fain to allow that Nell looked very well, and rather improved in looks than otherwise—which phenomenon she explained by the soft country air of Barton.

CHAPTER XXV.

CHRISTMAS DECORATIONS.



T was about six weeks before Christmas. Young Will was out and about again, with a limp as the only outward reminder of his accident; but within he had the memory of many happy hours with Nell, who used to visit him constantly, generally accompanied by one of her nephews, the which nephew was as often as not despatched to see what the housekeeper had in her store-room.

Young Will, who was almost indispensable to the vicar, whatever he was to Nell, was lunching at the Vicarage; that is to say, he was in the drawing-room with Nell, waiting patiently till Mr Paul should return, and enable them to have lunch.

‘That’s the worst of a Vicarage,’ declared Nell in one of her sweeping assertions, ‘you never get a regular meal. What with meetings and “dos” of different kinds, and being at everybody’s beck and call, you can’t call your body your own, let alone your soul.’

‘Yes, I often pity you, and wonder if there are compensations,’ remarked young Will. ‘There ought to be, if there is any truth in the law of compensation.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Nell, with a touch of bitterness in her tone. ‘People abuse you hard while you live, and take all your toiling and moiling as a matter of course; and when they

have killed you, they all lament and bewail your loss in deep mourning, and—send you heaps of wreaths.’

Young Will did not directly answer this remark, except by saying, ‘It is not easy to show one’s appreciation of anybody, especially if one is snubbed if one attempts it.’

‘That,’ observed Nell, ‘has nothing to do with the case, as Gilbert says. What has to do with the case is that I am starving, and if that blessed vicar does not come soon I would not answer for the consequences; and here is poor Mansfield growing visibly thinner. Oh, there he is; I always know by the way he drops his stick into the umbrella-stand; and in a dejected mood—I know that by his step.’

‘Oh, Will! I am so sorry to have kept you waiting. If I’d remembered you were here’——

‘You would have been in time,’ interrupted Nell. ‘Well, that’s polite to me!’

‘I did not mean that; but it was not polite to Will to forget he was coming to lunch. Really, I have been so worried this morning that’—— and he wondered why Will and Nell exchanged amused glances.

‘I knew that by your step, as I explained to Mr Will,’ said Nell. ‘Come to lunch. There’s nothing like hunger for exaggerating trifles.’

‘Trifles! This is no trifle. It appears you have offended half the parish, Nell.’

‘Good heavens! How?’ cried Nell. ‘Is it my new hat? I thought it was rather cock-a-hoop. Mrs Mulvaney wanted to know the other day if I called that thing a hat. She called it a bow.’

‘If you come to that, Nell, I prefer a little more covering for the feminine head myself; but I know it’s no use talking

to ladies about their dress. However, it is not the hat this time ; it's the Christmas decorations.'

'Christmas decorations!' cried Nell. 'My good man, what are you talking about? I haven't begun to think about them.'

'That,' said the vicar with emphasis, 'is just it. You ought to have begun weeks ago.'

'I suppose Miss Nell did not know that it was the custom here to begin making wreathing weeks before Christmas.—I ought to have told you,' said Will.

'She did know,' said Mr Paul severely; and—with wrinkled brow of deprecation—'she said it was gammon, and a fortnight was quite long enough to decorate any church.'

Will laughed; and Nell, though she laughed too, blushed.

'Nice gossip you are becoming, Peter; and a nice life I shall have if you are going to allow me to be backbitten like this! However, I did make that irreverent remark, and I stick to it. Why, they are in the habit of making hundreds—literally hundreds—of yards of wreathing, sewing ivy leaves on to webbing. If it were done by machinery now, as I thought it was'——

'Sew ivy leaves by machinery!' cried Mr Paul with his eyebrows raised. 'Why, even I know better than that.'

'You are a man, and therefore know a lot. I am but an ignorant woman; but what I do know is that life is too short to spend two months out of every year making wreaths for Christmas decorations. If it were any use now I would not object; but when the ivy in its natural state is so much prettier, it does seem such nonsense.'

'That may be true,' said the vicar; 'but it has been the custom here for years, and the ladies of the parish have been

used to be asked to do it, and they say Christmas-day won't seem like Christmas-day if the church is not properly decorated.'

'Gracious! I'll send off invitations to the old idiots this afternoon,' cried Nell, while her brother-in-law looked at her with disapproval.

'Old idiots! old idiots!' said little Mansfield, gurgling with delight at the addition to his vocabulary.

Then Nell, to cover her discomfiture, said hastily, 'I'll go down this very afternoon and start operations. They shall have Christmas decorations with a vengeance. I have an idea—several in fact,' and Nell's face grew animated.

'Oh dear, Will!' said Mr Paul with disturbed looks to Mr William Neville as Miss Lestrangle disappeared from the luncheon, and was heard running along the passage, 'what shall we do?'

'What about, vicar?' said Will cheerfully.

'About those decorations. Goodness knows what my sister's going to do; and when she is in that mood it means mischief.'

'She can't get into much mischief over church decorations,' replied Will consolingly. 'I should not worry, if I were you; besides, we will go and help, and keep an eye on her.'

'Oh, if you would!' said the vicar with relief. 'I have no time really for that sort of thing. Besides, I don't think it's a man's—I mean a clergyman's—work at all; but you have an influence over Nell.'

Mr Will Neville smiled to himself as he noted the skill with which Mr Paul got out of what he evidently expected to be an unpleasant business; but he was only too glad of an excuse of being with Nell. So, for the first time,

Mr Will graced the Christmas church decorations with his presence.

‘Oh, Mr Will! for goodness’ sake come here,’ cried Miss Hunter—a lively girl, whose name suited her, for only a sharp frost prevented her from being out with the hounds—as Mr William Neville, junior, came into the church a few days afterwards. The two were great friends in the hunting-field. ‘We are simply being slaved to death by Miss Nell. She insists upon all the pillars being decorated—a thing we have never had before. She declares it will not be Christmas to her if she has to sit in a church with bare pillars. Look at these ropes she’s given me to do; cruelty to animals I call it. Now, this rope is finished. Come, that’s not bad in an hour; and Mrs Mulvaney has not finished one “sublime” yet.’

Mrs Mulvaney looked up from her spline, which she was laboriously covering with evergreens.

‘No wonder. But what does it look like—all uneven, one part thick, the other thin? I could have done a couple of “sublimes,” as you call them, if I put the evergreens on like that, all anyhow.’

‘What’s it meant for?’ demanded Will. ‘It looks rather like a plucked turkey to me.’

Miss Hunter put her head on one side, and regarded her handiwork. ‘Well, now I come to look at it, so it does. That’s seasonable at any rate.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Miss Hunter,’ said Mrs Mulvaney indignantly. ‘I call it blasphemous in a church too.’

‘The atmosphere seems to be getting rather warm. Suppose we adjourn to the vestry for tea?’ suggested Nell.

‘Warm!’ cried matter-of-fact Mrs Mulvaney, ‘why, I am as cold as ice.’

Some of the workers smiled.

‘All the more reason for tea,’ rejoined Nell. ‘Come along, everybody,’ and she led the way with her arm in Mrs Mulvaney’s. Mr Will followed, and made himself useful handing tea and cakes, and, in spite of his lame leg, climbing ladders. He was inwardly amused at Nell’s excessive energy.

If hard work was what the Bartonians wanted they certainly had it, for never had such elaborate decorations been undertaken.

‘Yes, and what about our Christmas presents and cards,’ cried one girl, ‘and our plum-puddings?’

‘They ought to have been made weeks ago,’ replied Nell unsympathetically; ‘besides, the church ought to come first.’ To which orthodox remark there was no reply to be made.

But in spite of this, the Christmas decorations were not a success. Everybody grew tired of them, and the climax was the pulpit.

Nell, as she had said, had ideas which had at least the merit of originality; but it is doubtful whether originality is desirable in church decorations. At any rate, the villagers were very proud of their carved stone pulpit, and did not consider it needed decorating. Nell thought differently. ‘Not a nook nor cranny shall be bare,’ said she. ‘I’ll show them that three weeks is long enough to do decoration enough for two or three churches.’ And she did.

But when the pulpit was finished, Barton was unanimous in condemnation of Nell’s scheme of decorations, and the loudest was the vicar.

‘I should not like to suspect you of such bad taste, Nell,’ said Mr Paul, ‘or I should say you were making a joke of my pulpit,’ he announced when he came home after having been into the nearly finished church.

‘A joke! These Christmas decorations have been no joke to me, I can tell you,’ said Nell. ‘I am a wreck, a perfect wreck, with all I have done, and that pulpit is my *chef-d’œuvre*.’

‘Then all I can say is, I don’t care about your *chef-d’œuvre*, and I can’t conceive why you wanted to touch the pulpit at all. Miss Nesbit says you’ve chipped the stone by putting nails in; but I would have forgiven that if you had not hung fools’-caps all round.’

‘What!’ cried Nell. ‘Do you mean those bells?’

The vicar looked at her for a minute. In his mind lurked a suspicion that his sister-in-law was making fun at his expense. ‘I mean,’ he said in an injured tone, ‘those five odd-looking objects that appear to me like nothing so much as fools’-caps. If you mean them for bells, all I can say is that they do not look like bells. If you wanted to hang bells round the pulpit, why did you not get bells? And what on earth should you want to hang a lot of dinner-bells round my carved pulpit for?’

‘This,’ remarked Nell, ‘is an ungrateful world, and I really think you are the most ungrateful person in it.’

‘You can’t expect me to be grateful for being made a fool of,’ objected Mr Paul; ‘and if you did not mean to do that, what did you mean?’

‘I was simply illustrating a text in the Bible.’

‘I did not know there was any text about bells in the Bible,’ said Mr Paul doubtfully, ‘and I don’t believe there is.’

‘That shows lamentable ignorance on your part, and for a clergyman of thirteen years’ standing. I am not sure that the Bishop ought not to be informed.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, Nell, and never mind about my

ignorance ; I'll account to the Bishop myself. But just tell me what your precious text is, and why you want to illustrate it on my pulpit ?'

'It is : "Upon the bells of the horses shall be written Holiness to the Lord."'

'But I am not a horse,' said the vicar irritably, 'and those are not horse-bells, whatever they are. In the opinion of my little choir-boys they make excellent fools'-caps ; and I found them having a game in the vestry, the point of which was to catch a boy and put one of your bells, as you call them, on his head to make him a fool.'

'The little wretches,' cried Nell. 'I hope you punished them, Peter,' which she knew quite well he had not done, it being quite beyond the vicar of Barton to say a harsh word to any one, much less a child. 'How dare they touch my lovely decorations ? I've a good mind to take them all down.'

The vicar jumped at the suggestion. 'I wish at least you would take the wretched things off the pulpit ; I really don't think I could preach in it with those fools'-caps. Oh, well'—as Nell opened her mouth to object—'I can't help it. Every one calls them so, and I know I should feel a fool in that pulpit on Christmas-day.'

'Down they come,' said Nell ; 'and if I ever waste my originality upon Barton my name's Jemima, which it ain't.'

And it took the vicar some time to soothe Nell's ruffled feelings ; but great was the relief of the entire population when the pulpit stood out severely plain in the veritable bower into which the church had been transformed. The general opinion was that there was too much decoration.

'And that them there straggling bits of ivy a hanging down from them winders weren't no ornament whatsumdever.

‘What I sez, Miss Nell,’ said the old sexton, as he leant on his broom and surveyed the church with distinct dissatisfaction, ‘is this yere ain’t never been before, and ivy on the bush be one thing and ivy in the church be another; and when you’ve bin used to reg’lar wreaths all round them there winders it’s not in reason to like these yere twigs a-sticken out all any’ow.’

‘But it’s much more artistic, James.’

‘Oh, artistic? I dunno nothink about that,’ he said, continuing his sweeping. ‘What I sez is we ain’t never ’ad them afore, and when you’ve bin used’——

‘Boo! boo!’ cried Nell, her fingers in her ears. ‘There’s one thing you can’t deny, James, and that is that it has given you all something to grumble about; and wouldn’t the days be lank and long if all went right, and nothing went wrong; and wouldn’t your life be exceedingly flat if you saw nothing whatever to grumble at?’

‘I don’t know nothink about that,’ was old James’s non-committal answer. ‘But there, Miss Nell, you be young, and young people have to learn by experience.’

‘One would think I was eighteen by the way they talk,’ said Nell.

And Mr Paul and young Will, who knew the origin of the superabundant display of evergreens, thought that Nell was by no means the innocent person some people seemed to imagine.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SKATING: A DAY ON THE FROZEN FENS.



T is Christmas time again. Nell had learnt by experience; and two months before Christmas a large basket of ivy and so many yards of webbing had been despatched to each of the ladies, who sewed large leaves of ivy on to the webbing, so that now three days before Christmas there was nothing to be done but to paste the geometrically even wreathing round all the windows.

‘Four hundred and eighty yards, Peter,’ cried Nell; ‘and just look at it. What a lot of ivy they must have wasted—for they have only taken leaves of the same size—not to mention time. Well, each to her taste. I consider last year’s decorations a great deal more effective, not to say sensible. However, anything to please. I have a lovely idea for the font.’

‘Then, for mercy’s sake, Nell, keep it to yourself. I have not forgotten those fools’-caps of yours yet, and I am not at all sure to this day that you were not having a joke at our expense; and as for the pillars, the way those evergreens kept falling last Christmas positively got on my nerves. I was always expecting a wreath to fall on some unsuspecting worshipper’s head.’

‘You are an ungrateful generation of vipers,’ said Nell; ‘but do you think you can come and put these things up to-day?’

‘Why to-day—won’t to-morrow do? What is the hurry? Two days will do it.’

‘Yes; but if this frost holds we shall have skating to-morrow, and the Wrights have invited me over to skate on the meadows behind the Rectory.’

‘Oh!’ said the vicar, ‘that’s it, is it. I dare say I can manage to-day if young Will can help me. I can’t do it alone, and James is too old to do anything but hold on to the ladder, and say, “Mind you don’t go for to fall.”’

‘Oh! Will will help you all right. Besides, he wants to go skating too.’

‘I wonder what James will say?’ observed the vicar.

‘I’m not going to ask James’s permission to go skating in the middle of the Christmas decorations.’

However, Nell thought it as well that evening to propitiate the old man by remarking, ‘It’s nice to be so forward with the decorations—isn’t it, James? Better than last year—eh?’

But the old grumbler was not to be so easily pleased. “‘And for why,” I do say to Jane, sez I, “are we to be a-sweepin’ and a-messin’ round three days afore Christmas-day, contrairy to what we’ve a bin used to?” so I did say, sez I.’

‘Why, James, didn’t you say last Christmas that it was hard to be kept out on Christmas-eve clearing up, when you wanted to be resting, ready for Christmas-day?’

‘Last year was last year,’ said the old man obstinately. ‘You never do nothink in reason, you don’t. Last year we was that druv wi’ all them sublimes, or whatever you do call them; and Mrs Mulvaney right knocked up, she do say she was, through you a doin’ so much of it in the last week; and now here we are druv three days afore we need, and for why?’

—that is what I do ask.’ Again the old man leant upon his broom, and looked at Nell suspiciously. ‘Why bean’t we ’t ’ome to-day, and a doin’ of this to-morrow?’

‘Why?’ said Nell, half amused and half irritated; ‘because I have another engagement to-morrow.’

The old man smiled grimly. ‘No more ’an I expected. When I see Thomas agoin’ down wi’ a lovely pair o’ skates a hangin’ on his arm, sez I to Jane, “Mark my words, Jane,” sez I, “Miss Nell, thems her skates; an’ if this yere frost holds, which it will, off she ’ll be, degorrations or no degorrations.” That’s what I did say.’

‘James,’ remarked Nell solemnly, ‘your days will never be lank and long while I remain here, that’s certain. You just thank Heaven I’m here at present for you to grumble at.’

‘Law, miss, you ain’t never goin’ away. Well, there that’s just what I do say, so soon as you do get used to a body’——

‘I sha’n’t go away if you let me have a day’s skating in peace and quiet; but if you won’t let me have any recreation I shall get ill in this hole.’

‘Ole! You call this yere beautiful village a ’ole?’ and the sweeping of evergreens stopped again as James struck an attitude preparatory for another tirade. But Nell fled; and the next morning, having experienced the futility of concealment, drove boldly, accompanied by little Mansfield, who clasped a diminutive pair of skates in his arms, through the village, her blue frock and her bronze hair making a bright bit of colour in the white landscape.

Mr Will followed on horseback.

After an hour’s coaching of little Mansfield, who then demanded to be allowed to go to the fire and roast chestnuts, Nell was skimming lightly over the frozen fields.

'One comfort is you can't be drowned here,' she remarked to her friend Miss Wright.

'Well, I don't know about that,' she returned. 'If you got to a ditch on beyond those trees there, the floods were pretty bad this year, and you might easily get out of your depth.'

Later on quadrilles were formed, and in the scarcity of men one of the ladies came to Nell and said, 'Miss Lestrangle, we are a man short. Do you think you could ask that young lawyer from Barton to make an eighth?'

'By all means,' said Nell. 'Where's his partner?'

'Well'—rather awkwardly—'we thought you would not mind having him yourself. You see, we don't know him, and'——

'Don't want to,' finished Nell for her. 'Oh, I quite understand.—Mr Neville'—it was the first time Nell had ever said the name, strange as it may appear—'I want a partner for this quadrille. Will you come and pioneer me through?'

There was but one answer to be made, and the young man, with his usual tact and good-nature, accepted the position, and pioneered more than one lady through without in the least claiming acquaintanceship. When it was over, and he had skated away—for he never made Nell conspicuous by talking to or paying her any attention in public—one of the skaters, a member of what Nell called the inner aristocratic circle of the clergy, turned to Nell and said, 'How well you and Mr Neville danced that quadrille! I suppose you are used to each other's steps?'

Nell stared at her. 'What do you mean? I have never danced with the young man in my life before.'

'Oh, I did not mean anything. I knew you were great

friends, and I dare say that is it. I always dance better with men I know.'

'Yes,' returned Nell with ominous calm. 'I suppose it's a case of sympathy; and I certainly sympathise more with Mr Neville than with any one else on the ice. He is a gentleman.' And with this cutting remark, Miss Lestrangle turned and skated off.

On, on, Nell went, and the party she had left stood and watched her and admired the slender figure and its swift movements, and wished nothing had been said to vex her. But so well was she known that not one dared to follow her. She was angry with herself for having made a parade of her friendship with young Will, and angry with her friend for having made any comment on the friendship, so she skated blindly on, with hot cheeks and beating heart.

At first young Will, like the rest, watched her from a distance; but as she went farther from them he began to feel anxious. As Nell was skating in the direction of the river he sped after her.

'Good heavens!' cried a man present, 'Miss Lestrangle is making straight for the river. She'll be in for a certainty. The ice is not nearly thick enough to make running water safe. Ha! there's young Neville after her; he knows the danger.'

'Let's shout to her;' and the men made trumpets of their hands and shouted together to her to turn back. But Nell was out of hearing; and young Will, who was not, only increased his speed.

The lady whose lightly spoken words had caused Nell's flight muttered to her next-door neighbour, 'Sympathy has its advantages. Do you suppose it's a match? He is not her equal certainly; but with that Miss Lestrangle one feels

that she is not to be calculated upon. Still, it would be a dreadful pity.'

But the other, who was watching the two distant figures, remarked gravely, 'At present, it appears to be a race for death. I am not inclined to underrate such friendship at this moment; but I thought Miss Lestrangle was engaged to a man abroad.'

'Oh, that was broken off long ago. The man's married I believe. I suppose he would not wait for her while she was doing providence to her brother-in-law; and small blame;' but here the speaker's strictures of Nell were silenced as a cry broke from her companion.

Nell had disappeared! Young Neville for one moment stood still, and the watchers, some of whom had followed him, stood still too. If Mr Neville had been seized with panic Nell's chance was over, for they would never get there in time to prevent the tide carrying her under the ice. But he was only waiting to tear off his coat and waistcoat, break off a branch of a tree to use as a pole, and then he was flat on the ice crawling towards her, and he disappeared. By the time those following came up to the spot, Will's head appeared above the water; he was trying to keep himself and Nell afloat. Then a rope was made of coats, and flung to young Will; it just reached the edge of the ice, and the young man swam slowly to it, breaking the ice as he went, and was towed to the bank. When there, he and his burden—for Nell was unconscious—were dragged ashore. After saying, 'Look after her, please,' young Will collapsed.

Both the half-drowned and half-frozen victims were put to bed at the Wrights' Rectory. Nell soon recovered consciousness, and was with difficulty kept in bed that day. She awoke up next morning demanding to know if the frost

still held, as she wanted to skate. As a matter of fact she felt very shaky, and was aching all over ; but she did not choose to say so. Her would-be gaiety, however, disappeared when she heard that Mr Neville was very ill.

‘You see his lungs have always been weak, and he has never been the same since the influenza, nearly two years ago,’ said Miss Wright, who was not of the inner circle, and did know young Mr Neville.

‘Oh dear, I forgot him !’ cried Nell very penitent. ‘I do hope he is not going to be ill. I must get up at once and go to him.’

‘My dear Nell !’ cried Miss Wright.

‘My dear Mary !’ replied Nell, mimicking her, ‘don’t look so horrified. I have just nursed him through a broken leg, so you see it’s too late to begin being proper now ; besides, my character is fixed here now. No one expects me to attend to conventionalities, which saves no end of bother, I can assure you,’ Nell explained, hurrying into her clothes all the time she was talking.

‘I don’t know about that,’ said Mary Wright doubtfully.

‘Now Mary, you are in a constant state of “don’t know.” You are a regular agnostic, though you don’t know it.’

‘My dear Nell !’ Mary began in an expostulating tone.

‘So you are,’ declared Nell. ‘It’s all your fault my getting into the water yesterday. If you had said straight out that parts of the fen were dangerous, and that the river ran close by, I should have been on my guard. Instead of that, you said you didn’t know ; and if you who live here don’t know, you ought to find out before inviting a lot of innocent people to certain death.’

Miss Wright was simply speechless at this unjust tirade ; but she knew Nell far too well to waste time arguing with

her in her present mood, and contented herself with making her sit down while she acted as hairdresser, a kindly office which Nell really appreciated, being by this time quite exhausted. Mary Wright was quite content to go on brushing and arranging the beautiful hair, to a running accompaniment of scolding from Nell, who only waited to be finished before going to see young Mr Neville.

The young man was in a high fever, and evidently in no fit state to be moved; but, true to his character, he was much more distressed about the trouble he was giving than his own state.

‘And just at Christmas too, Mr Wright,’ he said to the rector, who accompanied Nell. ‘I wish you would let me be wrapped up in blankets and taken home in the ’bus or brougham. I am sure I should not take harm.’

‘My dear boy, I should not think of allowing such a thing, not even if the doctor sanctioned such a rash proceeding. And as for its being Christmas, Mary and I do not take much notice of Christmas. As a matter of fact, we are rather glad to have occupation at this time. Christmas festivities are not much in our line now.’ Mr Wright had not long lost his wife.

‘And I am going to help to nurse you, Mr Will,’ remarked Nell. ‘I shall demand a certificate for nursing from you directly. I am getting so much experience, thanks to the accidents I cause you.’

But meantime Nell had to go home to see to the decorations and her own festivities, this being Christmas-eve.

James had a good deal to say, and was evidently bursting with the desire to point a moral; but Nell was by no means in the mood to listen to his moralising.

‘I know all you are going to say, James,’ she remarked

the moment she saw the old man making for her; 'and we will consider it said. If I had stopped at home and "degorrated" the church, as you call it, I shouldn't have fallen into the river and dragged Mr Neville after me; and if "ifs and ands were pots and pans, beggars would ride to market;" but, seeing that they are not, beggars must walk—that's to say if it's any good their going to market, which I doubt, seeing that the expedition is not usually undertaken in a state of impecuniosity.'

Old James stood still and listened to her; then he deliberately turned his back, and as he stiffly stooped to pick up odd leaves and twigs from the aisle, remarked, 'What you're a talking about, Miss Nell, I don't know, nor don't want, with beggars and nonsense; but what I do say'—and here the old man straightened himself—'is that 'steds of you a makin' jokes about it you ought for to be a thankin' the Lord on your bended knees that you ain't a frozen corpse.'

'I don't see why, James,' said Nell provokingly. 'Weren't we all singing last Sunday "I want to be an angel?"'

'Ay,' said old James, wagging his head sagely at her; 'if we all was agoin' to be angels for certain.'

And Nell, feeling that the old man had decidedly the best of it on this occasion, turned on her heel to prevent his seeing a smile on her face.

But if Nell smiled with her lips there was no smile in her heart, for the doctor's report of young Will was very serious.

'I doubt his pulling through this time,' he said to Mr Paul. 'It was touch and go after the influenza; but he seemed to have made up his mind to get well then. Now the mischief has gone further, and if he does get better he will never be well, or anything but an invalid. I don't know that one can wish such a life for a young man.'

‘Doctor,’ interrupted a voice behind him, and Nell put her hand on his arm, ‘you must get him well—do you hear? I shall feel a murderer all my life if you don’t.’

‘Ah, Miss Nell, is that you? Come, come, you must not blame yourself. If young men will run into danger after young ladies they must take the consequences, and I’ll be bound he does not regret it. Besides, the mischief was done by the influenza. Any chill would have brought on this attack, and it is more satisfactory to have done some good by’——

‘You must not talk like that!’ cried Nell passionately. ‘I can’t bear it—I can’t indeed.’ Then she dashed away to cry her heart out in her own room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

GATHERING CLOUDS.



‘NELL, the Athletic Clubs say unless they have their ball this winter they will be bankrupt,’ said Mr Paul a few days afterwards.

‘Let them have it then,’ replied Nell quite indifferently. ‘As long as I am not asked to go, I don’t mind.’

‘Ah! but that is just it. Tom Jones says that unless you go it is no good attempting it, as no one will go.’

‘I don’t like the idea at all. I have never danced with butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, and I really don’t see why I should begin now.’

‘Well, I can’t say that I should like to see you waltzing with Mr Pike or young Brown; but they say unless you will go, for a little time at least, they may just as well give up the idea.’

‘I don’t know that that would not be the best way,’ said Nell. ‘Can’t they go round for subscriptions? I’d far rather give a guinea than go to a ball just now.’

‘You mean because of young Will?’

‘Yes,’ said Nell shortly, for the fiat had gone forth that young Will was dying. It might be weeks, or it might be months; but young William Neville would never rise from his bed of sickness.

‘Miss Nell dear, you must not feel like that,’ he said one

day when Nell broke down by his bedside, and said she felt like a murderess. 'I always was weak in the lungs, and it was only a question of which bad cold would carry me off; therefore you need not grudge me the pleasure of having done you that little service.'

'Oh, Will, you are always doing something for me! Oh, can't you try and live, Will? I shall miss you so; I am so dreadfully lonely here, you don't know how lonely. I dare not make a great friend in the village for fear of jealousy or things getting repeated. I sometimes feel,' with a faint smile, 'like Royalty: I am obliged to be careful whom I show attention to; and I am worse off than they, because they have each other, and I have no one. Oh, there's the vicar, of course; but he wants sympathy himself. Besides, I shock him. There is only you.'

Will put out his hand and touched her softly. 'It's beastly selfish of me; but I like to hear you say that—I mean about me. But you will not always live here. You will marry; and do you know that I am glad—I can't help being glad—that I shall not be here to see that? We men are very selfish, Nell. Let me call you Nell, for the little time I have left.' Nell nodded assent. 'My life has not been so happy that I need cling to it; and what happiness I have had of late years has been knowing you, and the best of all is having you to myself for the last few weeks.'

'You would have that all your life, Will, as far as that goes, for—my husband—has married some one else, so I shall never marry.'

'Nell, tell me, if you had never seen him, could you, would you, ever have married any one else?'

Nell considered for a few moments, and then she said, 'No, I think not, unless circumstances had been too strong

for me. You see I always had an ideal. When I saw him, before I spoke to him, I said there he is; and—well, there he is, and there he will always remain, his image filling up my heart and head so that there is no room for any other man—not in that way, I mean.’

‘And yet you did not show it much at the time.’

‘You see,’ said Nell, leaning back and looking dreamily into space, ‘I never thought it was anything but a quarrel till I saw the *Times* that morning, and then—then something died in me, some power of feeling; and since then I have never felt anything quite so much. It wasn’t a pain exactly, it was a queer sort of dead feeling; and—— But I am talking great nonsense, and all about myself.’

‘No, no; go on. I like it,’ cried Will. ‘It will do you good to get it out. Perhaps the feeling will come back. You are more cheery and more like what you used to be.’

‘Yes, I know that, and it is so funny I feel the desire to be cheerful, and to laugh, and to see the bright side of life, and all the time something underneath is saying to me, “This isn’t you. You are not in the least happy or light-hearted or frivolous or enjoying life; you are really a saddened, grave old-maid, just living because you can’t die, and laughing because some internal formation makes you laugh, and a good-natured desire to cheer up people round you makes you try to appear cheerful.”’

‘But surely you enjoy a joke?’ cried Will. ‘Your laughter seems so spontaneous.’

‘Yes, I enjoy a joke. Thank Heaven, I do enjoy a joke! I have a saving sense of humour. Basil used to say I would laugh in my coffin. I wonder if I shall. I don’t know. I think not. I think that then the real Nell, the grave, saddened woman, will appear, and that the surface gaiety

will fade. Well,' rousing herself, 'I am not dead, but very much alive, and likely to remain so for some time in all human probability, seeing that I am in robust health. It is you—— Oh, Will, I can't bear it! And now they want me to go to that ball, and I really can't do it.'

'I was just going to speak to you about that. I want you to go. I should be so sorry if my illness inconvenienced anybody.' Nell smiled. This was so like Will. 'And I started the clubs, so I should be very sorry for them to suffer through me. Besides, this ball was my idea. I want them to ask the Member for the County to come. I am sure he would if he were asked, and he would be some one decent for you to dance with. You must go, and tell me all about it. I have told Tom Jones to ask some gentlemen for you.'

'You need not trouble,' said Nell. 'I am only going for half-an-hour. And I don't mean to dance more than two dances, and they square ones.'

'That will spoil it all. If you do that all the Barton ladies will follow suit, and stalk out in a body after you, leaving a very damp atmosphere behind them.'

'Oh dear!' groaned Nell. 'It seems to me that everybody's private feelings are to be consulted except mine. I don't seem to come in anywhere.'

But, as usual, Nell gave way, and agreed to grace the ball with her presence for the greater part of the evening.

Will Neville seemed to rally a little just before the ball, and to the members of the ball committee who came to see him talked cheerfully of being up next week.

The doctor said nothing, but pursed up his lips and shrugged his shoulders. Even the vicar seemed sanguine.

Nell was not deceived. 'You are pretending to be better,

Will,' she said severely, 'because you want people to enjoy the ball. I believe you are not even feeling so well.'

'I am,' he said with his pleasant smile. 'I am feeling wonderfully well, and I want you to do something to please me. You know I proposed this ball for a very selfish reason. I wanted to dance with you once. You know I am dying, consequently I am a privileged person'—smiling—'so you must not mind what I say. I have wanted so often, when you have been miserable or worried, to put my arms round you and comfort you, and I thought at least I should have that bit of comfort at the dance. You are not angry?'

'No,' said Nell, 'you are privileged. Besides, Will—you must not mind this—but I feel almost as if you were a brother. It is funny, we have only known each other three years, and yet I think you are more to me than my own brother. Well, what do you want me to do for you?'

'I want you to come in your ball-dress and see me on the evening of the dance. It is a sick-man's fancy; you must humour it.'

'I will come,' said Nell.

'Yes,' said Miss Nesbit, 'they are all alike, women are, when there's a chance of dressing up fine. There's Miss Nell thinking of nothing but her dress, and full of this ball, and the Member coming and making everybody buy tickets. She's a regular butterfly, is Miss Lestrangle. And there's poor Will; if it had not been for her he'd have been at this dance himself. The best dancer in the place he was, and as jolly and healthy as any one three years ago, before he set eyes on her.'

'That he never was, Miss Nesbit,' said blind Mrs Seaman. 'Will was always delicate, for all his well-set-up figure and bright, fresh-coloured face.'

‘Oh, well, he might have lived years if it had not been for Miss Nell. First he gets influenza’——

‘Why, you are not going to blame her for that?’ cried Mrs Seaman.

‘He would never have had the influenza so badly if he had not just heard of her engagement,’ said Miss Nesbit with emphasis. ‘He has never held up his head since; that’s sure and certain.’

‘Of course I can’t say anything about that,’ said Mrs Seaman, ‘being blind; but I can say that his voice has sounded as cheerful; and as for this illness, poor Miss Nell did not go through the ice on purpose, nor did she ask him to come in after her. And as for his breaking his leg, that time, if you come to that, it seems to me that that was the vicar’s fault if it was any one’s; but somehow no one blamed him, it is always poor Miss Nell.’

‘Ah! you can’t see any wrong in Miss Nell, I know,’ said Miss Nesbit.

‘I can’t see much certainly,’ said Mrs Seaman; ‘but sometimes blind people see the most. I can tell you one thing: I have never felt my blindness quite so much since she came in one day when I was very low, and talked to me.’

‘Miss Nell turned preacher!’ said Miss Nesbit. ‘I should like to hear what she said.’

‘So you shall,’ said Mrs Seaman, quite roused on Nell’s behalf. ‘She told me how, when she felt inclined to mope because things were not going well with her, the thought of me, and how I would not let my affliction make me miserable, or make those round me so—though Heaven knows I did not deserve the praise, for oftentimes I have made you suffer by my irritability—that thought helped her to cheer up.’

Miss Nesbit did not make any reply. Just then she was

feeling very sore. Her favourite was dying; and though he was always glad to see her, and grateful for her visits, Miss Nesbit knew that he would rather have five minutes of Nell than five hours of herself; and that, however hard the pain, Nell could soothe him, while she, with the best intention in the world, was powerless.

Poor Miss Nesbit! She was a lonely woman, and Will had been her 'boy' ever since he had been a little toddler in petticoats, she always said; and now this red-haired woman had stolen him from her, and did not value the possession now she had it. Miss Nesbit felt that things in this world were very crooked. And then this ball! She hated the very mention of it. A ball almost next door to where poor young Will lay dying!—for Miss Nesbit did not now believe in the rally—and Miss Nell the heart and soul of the affair. It was truly a crooked state of affairs.

The evening of the ball came. Will had asked her to wear white, and Nell in soft shimmering white, with pearls round her neck, and her bright complexion and bronze hair, stood looking in the long pier-glass.

'It is odd,' she said, as she stepped up close to the mirror, 'very odd; but truly I look the picture of health;' and, as she smiled at the comely face in the glass, 'I am looking quite pretty really, and—I like looking pretty. There is no doubt I like it.' Then the smile faded, her face whitened, and she shivered—a way she had when her deepest feelings were aroused. In a moment she seemed to have become aged, and the pretty lips drooped, and the smile changed to a very sad look; but only for a moment. Five minutes later Nell was pirouetting in the hall for the benefit of her brother-in-law, the children (up for the occasion), and the servants, including the gardener and his family.



'Oh, Auntie Nell! you looks just like an angel! . . . Perfectly
booful!'

‘Oh, Auntie Nell! you looks just like an angel!’ cried Mansfield, his little hands clasped in an admiring attitude. ‘Perfectly booful!’

‘Perfectly booful!’ echoed the baby.

‘You do, indeed,’ agreed her brother. ‘I shall be quite proud to introduce my sister to the Member.’

Nell sighed. ‘He’s a married man, I’m afraid. Are there any eligibles there, Peter? It seems a pity this frock should be in vain, and this youth and beauty wasted.’

‘Only Mr Pike. I believe he is the richest man in Barton.’

Nell raised her chin and swept through the hall with the air of a princess. ‘Too low,’ she said as she stepped into the carriage, followed by her brother-in-law. ‘Tell the coachman to stop at the Nevilles’.

‘What for?’ cried her brother, puzzled. ‘Haven’t you your flowers and everything? What do you want to stop there for? You can’t go and see young Will like this. It would not be’—the vicar cast about for a word, and wound up lamely—‘suitable.’

‘I am going to see young Will, so please give the direction. I arranged it the other day. He expects me.’ As they drew up at the Nevilles’ door, Nell said, ‘Now, Peter, you are not to come. You will spoil the picture.’

Nell often looked pretty, and she had once or twice in her life looked beautiful; but she had never looked so beautiful, and never again would look quite as she did that evening when she opened Will Neville’s door and with a soft smile looked at him.

He gave an exclamation, and held out his arms impulsively, and Nell came forward, and with the same beautiful smile bent over and kissed him.

For a moment Will's arms were round her as he murmured, 'My darling,' then he pushed her from him, and smiling at her with a ghost of his old merry smile, said, 'Now, go. Good-bye, Nell dear.' And Nell, who had not said one word, turned and retired, with the smile on her face as if it were carved.

'There,' said her brother-in-law as she re-entered the carriage, 'you are shivering. You have caught cold in those cold passages without your opera cloak.'

'No,' said Nell, 'I am burning hot; shiver of the nerves. Whose carriage is that—the Straights'? Do let's get in first. Miss Straight's golden hair throws mine in the shade. She will spoil my *début* if she walks in before me.'

'What does that matter, Nell? How can you be so frivolous just after'——

'Here we are!' interrupted Nell hastily. 'Now, you see me do a swan-like movement up the room! Thank goodness, there is not a skin nor a carriage like mine in the room!' And in she sailed, with the smile on her lips, wondering to herself if it appeared as carved-like as it felt.

The Member, arriving soon after, asked who the smiling, beautiful girl was. And Miss Lestrangle's evening was a triumph, and she was the belle of the ball, being *facile princeps*, and cutting out younger and prettier girls.

'She does not look like Miss Nell to-night somehow,' said a girl-admirer of Nell's. 'She looks like some one from another world, and that smile isn't hers somehow.'

'Why, that smile is the prettiest part of her. What's wrong with that?' asked her partner, who happened to be Mr Pike.

'There's nothing wrong with it, only it's a lonely kind of smile.'

Mr Pike gave a hearty laugh, which attracted the attention of the bystanders, who were also watching Nell as she waltzed, an accomplishment she excelled in. Then he explained, saying 'Miss Smith is taking to saying as quaint things as Miss Nell herself. Who ever heard of a lonely smile?'

One of the young men thus addressed, looking first at Nell and then at Miss Smith, who was colouring bashfully at being thus quoted, said quietly and kindly, 'That was not a bad simile of yours, Miss Smith. I know just what you mean. It is only her mouth that is smiling. If you look at Miss Nell's eyes, they are not mischievous, as they generally are; they are quite grave.'

'I don't see it,' said Mr Pike stoutly. 'She looks brighter and more lovely than any one in the room, no disrespect to present company included.'

And Nell smiled on and danced on, and was the centre of admiration. All the young men for miles round, who were anybody, had come to the dance, and Nell could have been engaged three-deep if she had chosen; but she had no idea who she was dancing with, nor what she talked about. She had a feeling that she was reeling out small talk by the yard, and uttering an unlimited number of platitudes; but she was not sure of this or anything else. She knew the dance was a success, because every one was saying so, and she found herself answering that she was very glad it was so.

Then the clock in the large hall struck twelve, and Nell shivered, and her hands fell to her sides. 'I am tired,' she said suddenly to her partner. 'I am afraid I must go. Will you find Mr Paul for me?' And amid regrets and entreaties to stop, Nell—still, with that set smile on her face—went down the brightly lit room and out into the cold, dark night.

As they passed the Larches she looked up at young Will's window, and gave a cry: 'It is open, Peter. Stop and ask'——

'My dear Nell, at this hour!' expostulated her brother.

'If you don't, I will,' said Nell.

And Mr Paul pulled the check-rein and jumped out. He was going to knock softly when the door opened and the doctor came out.

'He died at twelve o'clock,' he said.

And Nell smiled to herself. 'I knew it was good-bye,' she said. 'I am glad I went.'

And the sense of loneliness which was always with Nell more or less was deeper from this hour.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A GHOST OF THE PAST.



‘WE are none of us indispensable,’ Nell had said when Basil died, and the discovery was a bitter surprise to her at that time. But that was different. If any one were necessary for the well-being and happiness of those around, it was Basil, who left a devoted and dependent husband and two delicate children, and the whole population of the little town had mourned for her. But young Will: well, young Will was not really necessary to any one, though he was liked by all. No one had ever heard young Will say an unkind word to or of any one, no one had ever known young Will—still ‘young Will’ in death, as he had been in life—refuse to do a kind act; and for many a day the people missed his bright, good-natured face as he went from his house to his office, where he made a pretence of doing the business with which no one would entrust him. Nell had once asked him if he had no ambition; but she was sorry for doing so the moment she had put the question, for he answered with a gravity which betokened strong feeling, ‘Yes, I want when I die that people should remember me with respect, and write on my tomb, “He was an honest man.”’ Further ambition, he always felt, was not for him. ‘I could never live it down. I would not myself go to a lawyer with a family history like mine, so why should I

expect other people to do so?' Now that he was gone people gave him the respect they had grudged him when here; and in their memories, if not on his tombstone, they wrote him down an honest man.

Nell looked up her Bible to see if there was a text to that effect, having some thought of asking that it be put on the gravestone; but it occurred to her that it would contain an implied reflection on his father, so she abstained from suggestion. Some months afterwards when—as she often did—she was going to put some flowers on his grave, she saw that the stone was up. 'William Neville, aged thirty-one;' and beneath, 'To the memory of an honest and upright man, beloved and respected by all who knew him.'

'So they have put it on after all,' she said to herself. 'And for a marvel the tombstone does not lie. I wonder, now, whether people will be held responsible for the falsehoods they write over the dead?'

In the first few days after Nell had lost her friend she doubted whether she should ever miss any one as much as she did young Will. It had become such a habit with her to get him to do all sorts of services for her, and to ask his advice about all sorts of things; and now there was no one, and a sense of loneliness grew upon her. Her letters home were read by Julia; and, knowing that, she was often prevented saying to her mother much that was in her mind. A restlessness which was not to be conquered possessed her.

'Peter,' she said, 'I think I must run up to town for a few days.'

'Yes, do,' said her brother. 'There is nothing very important going on next week. Only, don't stay over Sunday—will you?'

‘I don’t know,’ said Nell perversely. ‘The Sunday-school may have to do without me for once. It depends upon my feelings.’

And so Nell—laden with commissions, great and small, from friends and neighbours, including a long and laboriously printed list of ‘what I want’ from Mansfield—paid her mother a flying visit.

It struck Nell that her mother, though she was as affectionate as ever, was not altogether pleased with her visit, so she felt impelled to ask if she had caused any inconvenience. This, Mrs Lestrangle pointed out, was an absurd question to ask at her own home. Julia most certainly did not approve of her sudden appearance; but Julia, as Nell was wont to say, never had, and never would, approve of anything she did.

If any one had asked Nell to go to a large crush at this time she would have refused point-blank, and said she was not in the mood for it; but when she saw an invitation to a party of this kind stuck in the glass over the dining-room mantelpiece, and came to the conclusion by certain occult signs that she was not going to be asked to accompany her mother and sister, a determination to go took possession of her.

After breakfast the next day she said, ‘I see that I have just come in for the Blakes’ At Home. It is lucky. I was just going to order a new evening gown, and now I can wear it here.’

Mrs Lestrangle looked at her married daughter, who shook her head in answer, and said to Nell, ‘You have just had a white satin. Why not wear that—unless you spoilt it at the dance?’

‘I am going to get a black one,’ replied Nell, in answer to

Julia.—‘Mother, will you come with me this morning and help to choose it?’

‘Yes, dear, if you really must.’

‘Come along then. You can also assist me with Mansfield’s commissions, which range from a pony to a penny whistle,’ said Nell as she left the room.

Julia did not seem in the least disturbed by her snubbing. She used simply to say Nell had ‘very bad manners, and one need not expect politeness from her.’

Nell, though she did not know why, felt greatly irritated when she heard her mother say to her sister, ‘Then you would not tell her?’ And the latter replied, ‘Oh no; much better not. We must trust to chance,’ and here Julia’s voice dropped, as Nell was heard in the hall.

‘They are talking about me—of that I am convinced; but what on earth they are putting their heads together over I can’t imagine. It is probably some secret of Julia’s. I should not wonder if she were going to marry again. I see she has arrived at demi-mourning. Well, if they don’t choose to tell me, I don’t choose to ask.’ And, decided that this was the true solution of the embarrassment her presence at this particular juncture caused, Nell went off happily with her mother to buy a new gown for the At Home.

‘I can easily get it made in three days,’ she said, as they bowled along in a hansom.

‘I thought that white satin so very pretty and becoming, Nell. Why won’t you wear it? And I heard it created quite a sensation at that ball of yours; though, by the way, that is not saying much perhaps.’

‘I shall never wear it again, my dear mother,’ said Nell.

‘Dear me,’ cried Mrs Lestrangle, ‘how very extravagant

girls are nowadays. I should never have thought of throwing aside a gown after wearing it once.'

'Ah, mother, you were not a bit like me! In fact, I can't think how you came to have such a daughter.'

Mrs Lestrangle and Nell arrived home laden, and Nell took a mischievous pleasure in displaying the hundred-and-one things she had bought for her little nephews, whom Julia both privately and publicly said Nell spoilt absurdly.

When the three were dressed for the At Home, Mrs Lestrangle looked with pride and satisfaction at Nell. 'After all,' she said, 'I am not sure that black does not suit you better than any other colour, now that you have such a bright complexion and have filled out a little.'

Even Julia, conscious of herself looking very handsome, was graciously pleased to tell Nell that she had never seen her look better, and really thought she improved with age.

'You will throw our pale London beauties in the shade, Nell,' said her mother.

'I shall begin to think I look a perfect dairymaid if you talk like that,' said Nell.

'I am very glad you look so well in every sense of the word,' said Julia with emphasis, and Mrs Lestrangle sighed, and said 'Yes.'

The rooms were very full. Nell, soon separated from her mother and sister, was being greeted by one and another of her friends and acquaintances, who seemed with a lamentable want of originality to have only one remark to make to her, and that was that they had never seen her looking so well.

'That seems to surprise you,' said Nell at last, tired of the reiteration.

But this was very hastily denied. It was very stupid, Nell thought, more stupid than most parties; and then she

wondered whether parties had always been as stupid or whether it was herself. She seemed to have nothing in common with these people ; she had not been anywhere that they had been nor seen the latest play or picture. 'I feel as if I want to compare notes about my mothers' meeting,' she said whimsically to herself, and then smiled. Then, as the thought of Barton came over her, and the life there, and young Will, she felt that the artificial atmosphere was stifling, and she turned and went out on to a balcony and stood in her thin gown in the cold winter air. But she did not feel cold, only lonely. Then, hearing a step behind her, she turned. A man stood there, staring at her ; and Nell, feeling herself getting white, clutched at the balcony to steady herself.

'Granville !'

'It is really you then ? Why did you come to-night ? I thought I saw you in the drawing-room ; but they had told me you were still at that place, and never came to town except for a day or so.'

'Yes, that is so,' said Nell. To her great relief she found she could talk calmly.—'I don't feel anything,' she said to herself ; but she could not see herself, or she would have been undeceived.

'And your—your nephews—I hope they are well ?'

'Quite well, thank you ; they have recovered the measles by now.'

Nell did not know afterwards what had induced her to make this remark ; but Mr Neville took advantage of it.

'Yes, those measles cost me dear.'

'Indeed !' Nell raised her eyebrows. 'It is cold out here. I hope—your wife is well.'

'I—my wife ! One moment, Nell—for the sake of all I have suffered.'

Nell's lips curved contemptuously.

'For how long! Six weeks was it, or a month, before you forgot?'

Mr Neville spoke in a low, passionate tone. 'I have never forgotten. If I did you that dishonour by the act of one mad moment, I have paid for it, and paid heavily.'

'Then, having learnt by experience, you might have spared me the insult of this conversation,' said Nell, her eyes flashing. 'Is it not in you to be true to any woman?'

And at that Mr Neville fell back, and Nell, with white face and blazing eyes, went into the room. Taking a seat in an alcove, she rested and tried to recover her self-possession.

Some people she did not know sat near her.

'Have you seen Neville to-night?'

'No. Is he here?'

'Yes. I met him in the other room a short time ago.'

'Is his wife with him?'

'I think not. She was not with him then.'

'How odd! I thought he had not been long married.'

'I believe it was a case of marry in haste and repent at leisure. A man who holds an appointment under him says he has looked miserable ever since his marriage. The fair widow seems to have been a bad investment. By the way, the girl he ought to have married, a Miss Lestrangle, is here too, they say, looking handsome, and better than ever. Rather awkward if they meet.'

'She has something to answer for. I believe she jilted him in the most heartless manner.'

'Oh, well, he soon consoled himself.'

'Naturally, being a man. What man has the sense to face a trouble? None that I know. He was only like the rest. He was miserable and lonely, and he wanted a wife out there,

and he took the first who made for him, and—behold the result.’

‘They say she leads him an awful life. Poor chap! Anyway, he looks bad enough.’

Nell got up to go.

‘Ah, Miss Lestrangle! we have been looking for you everywhere.’ Nell anathematised her fate that she had not got away unknown. A bright colour flooded her face.

The two speakers turned, horror in their faces, and saw her. After she was out of earshot they looked at each other. ‘How awful!’

‘She did not care. Yes, she is handsome; but these handsome women have no heart. She looks as happy as possible.’

‘I don’t know. A smile sometimes covers a multitude of feelings, and it struck me as a face that had suffered. She has a fine face.’

‘You think so? But you men are all alike; a pretty face blinds you to all imperfections.’

And Nell, talking gaily to her cavalier, was taken back to her mother, who, with a swift look of anxiety, which turned to relief, asked if she were ready to return.

Ready? Nell was more than ready.

So this was what she was not to be told. Granville Neville was again at home.

And Nell did not care. As they drove home together, in a lull of the rapid conversation Julia was holding with her mother, Nell said, in a distinct voice, ‘I saw Mr Neville there to-night. You forgot to tell me that he was to be at the Blakes’. I did not think he was looking particularly well. That is the worst of India; the pay is very good, but the climate plays havoc with the average European’s constitution.

I am inclined to doubt whether the game is worth the candle.' A slight pause. Then, 'Every one seemed to think I was looking surprisingly well.'


There was another pause. Nell, when the mood took her, had a marvellous capacity for embarrassing and annoying people. Julia felt that she could shake her; and Mrs Lestrangle at that moment had a considerable amount of sympathy with Mr Neville. There was no doubt that he was looking wretchedly ill, and that he had paid dearly for his ill-advised and unhappy marriage. So Mrs Lestrangle felt, unreasonable as it may appear, as if Nell's good looks were a sort of aggravation of his misery, though she would have been just as vexed, on the other hand, if Nell had not looked so well. At any rate, Mrs Lestrangle did not feel inclined to pursue the conversation, and Julia thought it wise to abstain from saying what she felt, so she continued her comments upon the gathering they had just left.

Nell wept hot tears in her room that night when the pride which had come to her aid in public failed her.

Why, she asked herself as others have done before her—why should she care for this man, who had not had the patience to wait two years for her, and not care for the other who would have waited a lifetime for her, and would have—who had in fact—given his life for her? And yet Nell knew that Granville Neville, whom she had seen last night haggard and miserable-looking, and whom she ought to condemn for not making the best of the lot he had wilfully chosen, was the only man she had ever loved or could love, and that he had passed for ever out of her life.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MORE TROUBLE.

‘ELCOME back, Nell!’ said her brother when Nell came back from her flying visit to town. ‘I can’t compliment you on your looks. Evidently late hours and racketing about town do not suit you; you look a perfect wreck.’

‘I feel it,’ observed Nell. ‘A quiet country life and early hours are most demoralising.’

‘Demoralising?’ said her brother with raised eyebrows. ‘I should have said that it was the other way round.’

‘Not at all,’ argued Nell. ‘Before I came to vegetate here I was game for two or three dances on consecutive nights; but now one party reduces me to a pulpy condition. And—would you believe it, Peter?—when I wanted to make conversation I could think of nothing but the mothers’ meeting, and whether one ought to have music or only read instructive books. I nearly asked the young man who took me down to supper; but a second glance at his face discouraged me.’

‘I should hope so,’ said Mr Paul drily. ‘There’s a place and a time for everything; and a fashionable At Home is scarcely the place for such a discussion, nor should I imagine that the average young man-about-town is a suitable confidant on the subject. You seem to have no idea of the fitness of things. It is most extraordinary!’

‘It is,’ agreed Nell. ‘It must be some omission in my mechanism ; but, all the same, I should like to know what you talk about when you go to such affairs.’

‘I don’t go,’ said Mr Paul simply ; ‘at least very seldom ; and when I do I generally find some acquaintance, and then one finds plenty to talk about—mutual acquaintances, and so on.’

‘That’s gossip, as Mansfield would say. And, when you come to think of it, that is the staple conversation of the world.’

‘Talking of gossip, there is a rumour, which I heard at Barton yesterday, that Moxon’s Bank is shaky.’

‘Let us hope it is only a rumour then,’ said Nell, ‘for most of mother’s money is in it.’

‘Is it really?’ said Mr Paul anxiously. ‘I am sorry to hear that. I knew she banked there ; but I did not know they had her money invested.’

‘Practically all,’ said Nell. ‘What have you heard?’

‘I really don’t know much. Some one said, as I have told you, that Moxon’s was shaky ; and when I said I hoped not, they half withdrew, and said nothing certain was known about the matter.’

‘Well, I wish you would find out,’ said Nell, ‘for it would be no joke for us. I don’t know what mother would do.’

‘Come here, of course,’ said Mr Paul promptly. ‘There’s plenty of room for her, and I should be only too delighted to have her.’

Nell looked at her brother-in-law gratefully. ‘Thanks,’ she replied lightly. ‘It is very good of you’——

‘There’s no question of goodness,’ said Mr Paul hastily.

‘And just what I should have expected you to say. All the same, I hope it will not be necessary for you to turn your

Vicarage into a home for destitute Lestranges. I wonder,' she continued meditatively, 'whether I could earn my living if I were put to it. I have my doubts. I cannot dig, and to beg I am ashamed.'

'You need not do either,' remarked Mr Paul. 'You are earning it now by rights by keeping house for me. If you were not here I should have to pay a lady-housekeeper fifty pounds, and be miserably uncomfortable into the bargain.'

'Yes, I might do as a housekeeper; but do I look the part? That office is connected in my mind with a black silk apron and a large bunch of keys.'

'I should not invest in those articles yet,' suggested Mr Paul.

But his bantering tone changed when he opened his morning paper and saw in large type: 'Failure of Moxon's Bank. Thousands of families ruined.'

'Oh, Nell!' he cried. Nell came and stood behind him and read looking over his shoulder; then she went out quietly, made her way to the post-office, and sent a short telegram:

'How is mother?'

'Quite prostrate. Better come home at once.'

Nell went by the next train. 'Remember, Nell, you and your mother have a home here,' said Mr Paul, as he put her into the train. And Nell thanked him with swimming eyes.

'It seems to me that we have a lot of trouble as a family,' she said pathetically to herself as she sat staring at the quickly passing landscape. 'More than our share, I mean. Of course every one has troubles; but we seem to have nothing else, me especially. People say big troubles are easier to bear; but I am beginning to think that that is a fallacy. One may bear the big trials better in a way, because one braces up for them, and besides they stun one for the

moment; but one does not cry over the worst wounds.' And Nell, looking over the last three years, felt as if the troubles of a lifetime had been crowded into them. Her cup seemed full; she had yet to learn that it can run over.

Ills and troubles bring out character in a most unexpected way. Julia met Nell with the first really affectionate embrace Nell had ever had from her. Mrs Lestrangle was very ill.

'You see, she is not young, Nell, and the shock was too great for her. I blame myself'—Julia was not in the habit of blaming herself—'for not being down before mother, and seeing the paper first. I would have kept it from her.'

'She would have had to see it some time,' said Nell drearily. 'It would only have been a case of putting off the evil hour.'

'But it would not have come so suddenly upon her, and I could have pretended to read of some loss by Moxon, and suggested retrenching, and said what a good thing it was that we had my income.'

'Why, Julia, I should never have suspected you of such duplicity,' said Nell, feeling more kindly towards her sister than she had ever done before.

'Oh, when it is a case of life and death'——

'The end justifies the means,' suggested Nell.

'Not exactly,' said Mrs Spencer.

Mrs Lestrangle did not seem to have any rallying power. 'There's nothing organic the matter,' the doctor said; 'but at her age, of course, such shocks are dangerous.'

'She has been failing slightly for some little time,' said Julia.

'Why did you not tell me?' cried Nell.

'My dear, what would have been the use? And there was nothing to tell. She was just not quite so strong in

many ways ; but you could have done nothing ; no one could have done anything. If it had been a case of rousing, or anything, I would have done that, you know, Nell.'

'Oh, I did not mean to blame you,' cried Nell, impatiently, in her misery. 'It is nobody's fault ; it never is.'

Mr Paul came up to town when Nell's report of her mother's state reached him. He was very fond of his mother-in-law, and deeply grieved at her illness. He repeated to Mrs Spencer his offer of a home ; but Mrs Spencer, who was one of the few people who did not like Mr Paul, and always said that he was really the most selfish man she knew, declined the offer on her mother's behalf politely, but firmly.

'Thank you, Peter ; but I hope as long as my dear mother is spared to us that she will make her home with me ; and Nell knows, without my telling her, that where mother and I am is her proper home.'

This speech was not appreciated by either of her hearers ; but neither of them made any reply. Mrs Spencer, therefore, continued :

'Of course we shall have to give up this house, and take a smaller one. Personally, I should prefer to live at Brighton, or some other seaside place ; but it will depend upon my mother's health and wishes on the subject.'

Mr Paul, feeling snubbed, made no further offers, but very soon returned to Barton, where his presence was greatly needed, leaving Nell behind him, with strict injunctions not to leave her mother while she needed her—which Nell had not the slightest intention of doing—and not to worry about the boys, which she was much more likely to do.

The weeks went on, and Mrs Lestrangle lay there, neither better nor worse, and Nell began to hope that as the summer

approached she might improve. Mrs Spencer, though she was not quite so sanguine as Nell, began to think that it was time to settle some course of action.

‘We cannot stay here,’ she said; ‘and, if we are going to move, March is a very good time to get the lease taken off our hands. The doctor does not think the move would hurt mother.’

Nell sighed as she thought that very little would hurt her mother now. And so Mrs Spencer went about looking for houses. Nell privately thought that the day expeditions to the seaside were a relief to her energetic nature, unused to confinement.

At last Mrs Spencer had settled upon her future abode, and came home one day in excellent spirits. ‘It will have to be Brighton after all,’ she told Nell. ‘I have seen the very house, so convenient and roomy—for the rent, that is to say. Quite a lady’s house. I really think I have been most fortunate. Of course I should like mother to have seen it first, and given her opinion; but as that is unfortunately out of the question, I have taken the one I think she would have chosen.’ Mrs Spencer undid her bonnet strings with the air of a woman who had done her duty.

Nell did not believe that Mrs Spencer had much idea of what kind of house her mother would have chosen, and she was of the opinion, privately, that if Mrs Lestrangle had her choice she would rather make her home with Mr Paul than with Mrs Spencer. Nell meant when it came to the point of moving to ask Mrs Lestrangle which she would like to do; but at present the great thing was to avoid all agitation of the patient; and so preparations for the move at quarter-day went quietly on, conducted chiefly by Mrs Spencer.

‘After all,’ said Nell justly, ‘it is her money which is paying for everything; and if she does “boss” it a great deal I don’t know that I have any right to object.’

But upon one point Nell’s mind was fully made up. ‘Nothing on the face of the earth shall induce me to be beholden to Julia for my daily bread. If it were a choice between that and the workhouse I would unhesitatingly choose the latter, oakum-picking or wood-chopping included.’ Nell had very hazy ideas about the occupation of paupers. But at present the necessity for any such choice being made seemed remote. Life seemed as if it might go on like this interminably; and then, by a sudden shake of the kaleidoscope, everything was changed all round, and Nell found herself swept on by the current of events she knew not where, till some months later she found herself stranded.

First, without any warning—at least so it seemed to the two watchers—Mrs Lestrangle’s illness became more serious, and it was apparent that any move was out of the question for her. Mrs Spencer laid aside all thought of self or her own convenience, and thought only of her mother. New tenants had been found for the house they were in, and it was very awkward; but, as Nell remarked drily, ‘Illness generally was so. A convenient illness is not a common occurrence.’

But Mrs Lestrangle solved all difficulties by slipping quietly away. She had never given any one any trouble in her life, and so now, when her presence in that condition would have been a trouble—though, of course, of this she had no idea—she went from among them, and her place knew her no more. The quiet, gentle influence was sorely missed.

This time the greatest loser was Nell. Mrs Spencer was most generous, and refused to take her share of the furniture;

and her mother's personal effects—which in the will, made before Mrs Lestrangle's money-losses were known—were left between them.

‘We must have them valued, Nell, and I will buy in what I want, and you must either sell or keep the rest.’

Nell, in a state of indifference, let Mrs Spencer manage everything, which suited the energetic widow admirably; and Nell had a small sum in case of emergencies.

‘I suppose, Nell, it is no use my asking you to come and live with me? I shall be very lonely. I would try to make you happy; and if you will allow me to say so, I think it is your rightful place. Peter will marry again, and where will you be?’

‘Where I am now,’ said Nell.

‘Not at all. You will be older, and much less likely to marry than at present. You are better looking now than you were in your teens.’

‘My dear Julia, please put that idea of my marrying out of your head. I shall never marry. If it comes to that, you are much more likely to marry, and then where should I be?’ wound up Nell triumphantly.

‘The cases are not parallel,’ said Mrs Spencer. ‘You could still live with me in the improbable event of my remarrying; but I hardly imagine that either Peter or his second wife would find you a desirable addition to their household.’

So Nell came off second best in this encounter. But she was not moved by the argument; and, while thanking her sister, persisted in returning to Barton.

‘Now, remember, Nell, you have always a home with me,’ said Mrs Spencer as she saw Nell off at Paddington. ‘If you were wise you would come to Brighton with me now.’

They have managed to do without you for nearly three months now, and Peter does not lament your absence nearly as much as he did at first. In fact, he seems to be making plans without you. You have made the break now ; why not go back, pack up, and come to me ? I should be very glad to have you.' Mrs Spencer spoke really affectionately, and Nell was touched by it.

'Thank you very much, Julia,' Nell said in reply. 'I shall never forget your kindness. But I could not leave the boys—Basil's boys ; they are so delicate, and I am so fond of them, and they are all I have left to love me, except you. And I can come and stay with you.'

'Yes, do ; and bring the boys for the summer. It will do them good,' said Mrs Spencer. As she was not at all fond of boys, Nell felt that this was a great concession to sisterly feeling on Julia's part. Then the train went off, and Nell felt with relief that her future was settled at last. Yet, though history repeated itself, and at each end of this journey she had been offered a home, a kind of feeling haunted her that that was just the one thing she had not had for years, and never would have again.

CHAPTER XXX.

A MATTER FOR CONGRATULATIONS.



It is said that coming events cast their shadows before. In this case, Eleanor Lestrangle should have seen visions: wedding-bells, and bustle, and change; but, quick-witted as she generally was, Nell saw none of these things. She was physically and mentally tired, and only thankful that her brother-in-law did not ask her opinion every moment now nor need her co-operation in everything he did, as was his wont. If she thought about it at all it was to commend him for his unusual thoughtfulness in sparing her for a little while. No suspicion of the truth entered her mind.

‘Mary Wright has been very kind while you were away,’ Mr Paul said one morning.

‘She would be sure to be that,’ said Nell wearily.

‘She has been over several times to take the children for a drive—with her father, of course.’

‘Why with her father, of course?’ asked Nell with a momentary wonder. ‘She is not afraid to drive herself, surely, with that jog-trotting old pony of theirs?’

‘Oh, it is not that; but, of course, she would not like to come here alone.’

‘I don’t see why—not at her age,’ said Nell, without much interest.

‘She’s only thirty-one, Nell. That’s not so very old; it’s a very suit—good age.’

‘How on earth did you know her age? Now that I come to think of it, she has never told me her age. She looks more. I suppose it’s her sallow complexion.’

‘You women never seem able to avoid saying nasty things about each other,’ said Mr Paul, rather annoyed.

Then Nell, rousing herself, woke up to the fact that she was not giving satisfaction by her conversation.

‘Why, what have I said? I really was thinking about something else. Oh, abusing Mary’s complexion! I only said it made her look older; but I did not in the least mean to be spiteful. I think she has rather a fine face. I must go over and see her. I wonder she has not been to see me.’

‘She always says such tactful things,’ observed Mr Paul.

‘Now, that is the very last character I should give to Mary’s remarks. Oh dear,’ with a smile, ‘I suppose I shall be called ill-natured again. But, even at the risk of that, I can’t perjure myself by calling Mary Wright tactful, when I think of some of her remarks. However, she is the kindest-hearted and most generous person I know, and has enough propriety and principle to stock a town.’

‘I’m glad you have such a high opinion of Mary Wright,’ said Mr Paul, and he changed the conversation.

After he had gone out, and Nell, very tired, was resting in an arm-chair, feeling good for nothing, the conversation recurred to her, and she wondered, first, what had made her brother-in-law discuss Miss Wright, it being quite contrary to his custom to talk about his neighbours; secondly, what made him call her ‘Mary Wright,’ for it was not his way to make free with ladies’ Christian names. However, these were only passing thoughts; and Nell—saying to herself,

‘Peter must have sympathy, and I suppose in my absence he has been reduced to going to Mary for it’—dismissed the subject of Miss Wright from her mind.

A week passed. Nell was not feeling very well, and had not summoned up energy to drive over to see Miss Wright, nor had the latter called upon her.

‘Hadn’t you better ask Mary Wright over?’ asked Mr Paul. ‘I am going in that direction to-day, and will leave a message for you if you like.’

‘What are you doing in that direction?’ asked Nell, without any object.

‘I suppose I am not obliged to give an explanation of the direction of my walks?’ said Mr Paul with some spirit.

Nell was never more surprised in her life. She looked up at her brother-in-law, who seemed unaccountably embarrassed.

‘I really beg your pardon. Pray accept my apology. The remark was made in pure idleness. I was only wondering if anybody was ill in that direction,’ she said.—‘I suppose,’ said Nell to herself, ‘that he is going to give money to some undeserving old reprobate, and does not want to tell.’

‘No. I am sorry I spoke crossly, Nell. The fact is, I am going out.’

‘Well, go then,’ said Nell, smiling pleasantly.

‘And the message?’ said her brother, as he stood at the door.

‘To whom? Oh, to Miss Wright! Anything you like. Say I wonder she has not been to see me.’

Nell found to her surprise that she felt distinctly hurt at the way her brother-in-law had spoken. ‘It was not a bit like him,’ she thought. ‘In fact, I never knew him to speak so before; but perhaps it is my imagination. I am not myself just now, and everything bothers me.’

Mr Paul came back in very good spirits. 'She'—'Peter's manners are deteriorating,' commented Nell to herself—'is coming to spend the day with you to-morrow.'

'The day, Peter! I never told you to ask her for the whole day. I don't believe I can stand her for the whole day.'

'Well, defend me from having you for a friend, Nell!' said Mr Paul.

'I simply don't feel up to entertaining any one for a day just now,' said Nell; 'that is all.'

'Never mind. I will take her round the parish, or for a walk,' said Mr Paul.

'What pleasure do you suppose going round the parish will be to Mary Wright? No. Don't bother; I will look after her.'

'Oh, it won't be any bother,' said Mr Paul. 'I—I should like to.'

'Well, it's very good-natured of you. I am sure I hope Mary will appreciate it.'

'I hope so too,' said Mr Paul drily.

Mary came shortly before lunch next day. About three o'clock Mr Paul came into the drawing-room, and asked her to come for a walk, an invitation which, to Nell's relief, she accepted with alacrity.

'Talk about tact,' said Nell when Mary had gone out. 'Most people make a mess of condolences; but anything quite so awkward and stupid as Mary has been to-day it would be difficult to imagine. I really never liked her so little. And how pale she looks! I suppose that was her putting on black out of respect to me. I wish people would be natural, and either speak from their hearts or leave it alone and talk on general subjects.'

Nell waited tea for the pedestrians till half-past five o'clock; and then deciding that she had done all that politeness required, she had a solitary cup of tea. It was as well, for no one came home to tea, and at seven o'clock Mr Paul, looking rather excited, arrived. Nell heard his stick drop with more than usual energy into the umbrella-stand, and then he came into the drawing-room.

'Where's Mary? What sort of behaviour do you call this?' said Nell playfully.

'You said you did not feel up to entertaining her, and so we took rather a longer walk than we expected, and Mary thought she would rather go home straight. She sent her love to you.'

'Did she?' said Nell sarcastically. 'I suppose these are country manners.'

'Please don't take it like that, Nell,' said Mr Paul, coming to sit beside his sister on the sofa. 'It was my fault. She asked me to explain to you first.'

'Oh, don't make a fuss about nothing!' said Nell carelessly. 'Mary never had any manners to speak of.'

'I really can't let you speak about Mary like that,' said Mr Paul, his eyebrows 'rucked' up as usual when he was annoyed.

Nell stared at him. 'Why not, pray?'

'Because—that is to say—I like her.'

'Well, like her as much as you like,' said Nell indifferently.

'But she wished me to explain, Nell, if you will allow me.'

'There's nothing to explain, Peter. I believe I am not well, or cross, or something.'

'You want a change, Nell.'

Nell laughed shortly. 'I want,' she sighed, 'what I can't get, Peter.'

Mr Paul sighed too. 'We all have our troubles, Nell. I have had mine. But I have something to say to you to-day.' Mr Paul seemed to feel that this was not a good moment for his remarks; but he was one of those soft, obstinate men who are not easily turned from their purpose.

'Say on, Macduff,' said Nell, with an attempt at lightness, and then the memory of another time when she had used those words to young Will Neville rose to her mind, and she sighed.

'Nell, I want to give you a sister.'

'I've got one. She's quite enough for me. What do you mean, Peter?'

Nell was fairly puzzled.

Mr Paul took the bull by the horns. 'I thought it—we thought it—only right to speak to you first. I mean before I take a wife.'

It is said that if your heart stops you die. In that case Nell thought that she must certainly have died and come to life again in this moment; but it was only a moment, and Mr Paul was scarcely conscious that she made any pause before she answered, speaking quickly:

'Why did you speak to me first? You have a right to take a dozen wives if you like.'

'I am not talking of a dozen wives,' said Mr Paul, much hurt.

'To be sure, we are not Mormons. I forgot; it is only two at present you want—I mean one at a time, of course. Oh, I see! It's Mary Wright.' Then, after a pause, 'I have been very dense. I had had no idea I could be so dense. Well, I congratulate you. When is it to be?'

'Nell, I don't like your tone,' said Mr Paul in aggrieved accents. 'I have at Mary's request spoken to you first.'

‘That seems to me rather involved. How could you speak to me first if you have spoken to Mary first?’

‘I spoke to Mary this afternoon.’

‘Oh, hence this consideration for me, in taking Mary out. Seems to me I have wasted a good deal of unmerited gratitude, not to say pity, upon you.’

And here, as the remembrance of the malapropos remarks she had made since her return recurred to her memory, Nell laughed, but felt it incumbent upon her to make some kind of apology.

‘If you had told me the true state of affairs when I came’—she was going to say ‘home’ but changed it to ‘back’—‘I should not have made several remarks which in my ignorance I did make.’

‘Oh, never mind that, Nell!’ and Mr Paul put his hand kindly on hers.

Nell made an excuse to get up and arrange a flower which had fallen out of a vase on the mantelpiece, and when she sat down again it was on the other side of the room, as far away as she could from Mr Paul, and incidentally with her back to the large bow-window.

‘I know that it is hard for you’——

‘Not at all,’ Nell interrupted in a hard tone.

‘To think of any one in dear Basil’s place.’

‘Please let us leave her out of the conversation,’ said Nell coldly. ‘I should not think of comparing her with Mary Wright.’

Mr Paul looked absolutely miserable.

Nell felt penitent; she was conscious that she was not being kind. To sit there and listen to her brother-in-law sentimentalising over Basil was more than she could stand; but her sense of justice came to her aid, and she said, ‘My

dear Peter, I am afraid I am not being very sympathetic ; but please believe that I am really glad that—you should have some more happiness in life. You were a good husband to my sister while she lived, and you have a perfect right to marry again after three years of loneliness.’

Mr Paul hastily interposed. ‘Not quite lonely, Nell. You have done your best, and I am very grateful to you. But a wife is a wife ; and at the head of a large parish’——

‘Exactly,’ said Nell ; ‘therefore, with all my heart I congratulate you.’

‘And you see you went away for three months and left me alone.’

‘I did,’ said Nell in a queer tone. ‘I went—I went to my mother’s deathbed. It seemed the right thing to do.’

‘Oh, I am not blaming you.’

‘Thank you,’ said Nell.

‘But it was very awkward for me.’

‘That,’ said Nell, ‘is a peculiarity of trouble and bereavement. It generally does cause “awkwardity,” as Mansfield says.’

Mr Paul did not like the tone of levity, and said, ‘I think, Nell, you are tired. I am glad you have taken my news so well. We will not talk about it any more this evening.’

‘Thank you,’ said Nell.

Fortunately dinner was announced, and both Nell and Mr Paul sat down just as they were.

After dinner, Mr Paul said, as he left the drawing-room, ‘I am going to write to her. May I send some kind message from you?’

‘By all means,’ said Nell. ‘Give Miss Wright my sincerest congratulations.’

‘I ought to have said “Mary,” or,’ with a smile, ‘her,’ said Nell, as her brother-in-law passed on to his study and left Nell to sit in the drawing-room alone; ‘but flesh and blood are flesh and blood, and I couldn’t.’ Then Nell seated herself in her favourite position in her chair, and hugged her chin.

‘The fact which is oftenest being impressed upon my mind,’ she remarked, ‘seems to be the fact that we are none of us indispensable. I wonder, if I could have looked ahead these three years, whether I should have done just the same. I hope so; and I wonder whether, if Peter could have looked ahead, whether he would have done just the same.’ There came a pause. Nell did not see her way to answering for Peter. ‘I don’t think about Peter,’ she said. ‘He passes out of my life from this evening.’ Nell sat there alone, and try as she would she could not summon up her usual pluck to face the situation.

The boys: it would not bear thinking about. Her own life: there did not seem to be anything to think about as regarded that. A blank stared Nell in the face. She seemed to have come to the end of everything; as if—to use an expression she had not understood when she heard it used by some one—as if the bottom had come out of everything.

At any rate she was not capable of making any plans or piecing together the fragments of her life. She was not even conscious of feeling lonely. That would come; at present she seemed to be thinking of nothing. Not the past, it did not bear thinking of; not the present, that seemed chaos; not the future, that was an absolute blank as far as she was concerned.

Mr Paul went into his study and prayed. There he had the advantage of Nell. He undertook nothing without

prayer; he said it was a great comfort to him. Nell quite believed it. It was no comfort to her, she said. 'People seem to me to make up their minds, and then pray, which I call making a lay-figure of the Almighty.' She said this once to Mr Paul; but he was simply shocked, and said so. He agreed with Mansfield that Nell was lamentably wanting in religious feeling.

How long she sat there alone in the darkening drawing-room she did not know. No one had brought lights. Probably it was thought that she was with Mr Paul, as it was unusual for her to sit the whole evening alone. Presently she heard her brother-in-law's step in the hall. He waited for a moment, evidently to light a candle. Then she heard his step going upstairs into his bedroom overhead, and she realised with astonishment that he had gone to bed. He had simply forgotten her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GOOD-BYES.



BEFORE Nell was thoroughly awake next morning she was conscious of a dead-weight and a sickening feeling of misery, and then she remembered. She looked at her watch : seven o'clock. It was not too early to get up. Anything, rather than lie there, and be obliged to think. A knock at the door roused her.

'Yes,' she cried.

'Oh, Nell, it is only I. I remembered that I had not seen you to say good-night. If you are not very sleepy, will you get up and talk?'

'I *am* getting up,' replied Nell through the door as she sat up in bed. 'You can go away. I'll come down as soon as I am dressed.'—'Not that I want to talk to him, or that there is anything much to say,' she soliloquised; 'it's a case of wind-up all round.' Suddenly she stopped her dressing operations; a thought struck her.

'No,' she said, as she brushed her beautiful hair with a vigour inspired by a desire to work off uncomfortable feelings rather than thought for her hair. 'No; that I will never do. I will go through the rest of it, the good-byes, and the handing over the keys, and the rest; but go to the wedding I cannot, and will not. One must draw the line somewhere, and that is where I draw it.'

But the 'going through' entailed more than Nell anticipated.

'If only Will were here!' was the cry that was constantly in her heart. 'He would have saved me all this congratulating and unpleasantness.'

For, as the news spread abroad, congratulation was the order of the day. It was the general opinion that Miss Nell had done what was a most uncongenial duty well and bravely; but every one had an idea that this set her free to marry.

'You'll be the next, Miss Nell,' they said. 'Will you be married from here, do you think?'

'No,' said Nell quietly. 'I am not thinking of marrying at present.'

One or two said something about her being turned out; but Nell shrivelled up the speakers with her eyes.

Then Mr Paul, simple man that he was, had been in the habit of going to Nell for sympathy in all circumstances, and knew no better than to show her the letters of congratulations he received in such large numbers. Perhaps he had a half-conscious wish to show Nell that his action was approved by all the world. His attitude at this time was not altogether dignified. It is difficult to be lenient to the love-making of a man of over forty; especially was it difficult to Nell, who insisted upon hurrying her departure.

'But we did not think of marrying for some months,' he said plaintively to Nell. 'And we'—Nell was getting very tired of the royal pronoun—'hoped you would stay here till then. It would be much more convenient for us.'

But Nell did not feel called upon to stay at Barton for the convenience of Miss Wright, and felt as if the sight of the two together would be more than she could bear; so she

said as kindly as she could that she thought it would be better for all parties that the old régime should be ended as soon as possible, and the new one inaugurated.

‘But so soon after mother’—— he began.

Nell interrupted him hastily. ‘Oh, you can’t go on multiplying relationships like that! I have a cousin who married several times. He would never have got through so many ceremonies if he had waited to mourn for all his different wives’ relations.’

But Mr Paul did not like this view of the case, and looked miserable, which was his refuge under such circumstances; and Nell added more kindly, ‘Peter, you have done your duty to our family; now go and do it to another. Dear mother, I know, would agree with me.’

But if Mr Paul and his demands upon sympathy were trying enough, her interview with Miss Wright was worse. Nell foolishly put it off as long as she could, and when she could delay—with decency—no longer, went to call at the Wrights’, wishing that she had gone the first day, when it would not have been so bad.

Mary Wright was a good woman, and very anxious to make things as little trying to Nell as possible under what were undeniably trying circumstances; and if Nell had come the morning after the proposal, as she ought to have done—especially as Miss Wright had made a point of her being consulted before matters were settled—all might have gone well. At any rate, they would have gone better. But Mary Wright was only human, and at bottom there was a slight jealousy of Nell; and when Nell did finally come to pay her tardy visit of congratulation, Miss Wright was by no means so ready to be friendly.

It is difficult to say which of the two was most embar-

rassed for the first few moments. Nell, being more a woman of the world, recovered herself first, and managed to bring out some conventional congratulations.

‘I’m afraid you are not pleased,’ said Miss Wright bluntly.

‘My dear Mary, you have taken my breath away by the suddenness of the thing. When I have recovered the aforesaid breath no doubt I shall be voluble in my congratulations.’

‘Oh, I don’t want you to be voluble, if you will only be a little sincere.’

Nell looked gravely at her. ‘I am perfectly sincere,’ she said, ‘in wishing you both a long life and happiness.’

‘Thank you, Nell; and I am sure, when you come to think of it, you will see that it is for the best. You see you could not have stayed here much longer. The boys would have had to go to school, and’——

‘I did not come here to discuss myself or my movements,’ said Nell coldly. ‘I quite agree with you that it is for the best.’

‘But what will you do, Nell?’

‘My last remark answers that question,’ said Nell calmly. Inwardly she was thinking, ‘It is a little too late to trouble yourself about that.’ The thought would arise that they might have waited a little till she had recovered her last blow; but Nell tried to be just, though she did not succeed very well at this time.

‘Of course, Nell, I—we—shall be very glad to have you to stay with us sometimes.’

‘Thank you,’ said Nell drily.

‘Not just at first perhaps.’

‘No, not just at first,’ echoed Nell, struggling with a wild desire to laugh. It was all so funny, so upside down: that

Mary Wright, who was so pleased to have Nell take notice of her, and to be asked to Barton Vicarage—that she should be asking Nell in a condescending way to come and stay with her after a time, at her (Mary's) convenience. But Nell felt that if she got beyond the smile which she felt was curling her lips, but which Mary took to be gratification at the invitation, she should break into such uncontrollable laughter as would anger her friend. Inwardly a conviction was dawning upon her that when she left Barton Vicarage it would be for ever.

But Mary was speaking. 'I wonder you never guessed anything,' she said.

'That day, you mean. Yes, I certainly was very blind. But you see my thoughts were not set upon weddings; quite the reverse.'

Mary felt as if some reproach was implied, and observed, 'I am very anxious not to be married for six months at least; but Peter'—Nell squirmed—'will be so lonely if you insist upon going away at once, as I hear you intend doing. Besides, I was not alluding to the other day; I meant before that.'

'Before that? How could I? I was away.'

'Oh, our affection is of longer standing than that. Only, if you don't mind my saying it, you always monopolised Peter.'

'I am sorry I have stood in your way so long,' said Nell with sarcasm. 'Pray, how long have you two been waiting for me to take my superfluous self out of the way?'

'You need not take it like that, Nell. You did not mean it, I know; and as for me I have loved Peter ever since I have known him. I mean, when I saw him five years ago I said that is the only man I could ever marry.'

'But he had'—— Nell paused and stared at Miss Wright.

She felt she could not finish her sentence, and say he had a wife then. It was hardly respectable, she thought; and her knowledge of Mary Wright became wider.

‘I know he was married then; but I meant if he had met me first.’

‘I wish to Heaven he had!’ said Nell fervently. ‘I wish to Heaven he had! I should have Basil with me now.’

‘And you would have had no nephews.’

‘And,’ repeated Nell, ‘I should have had no nephews.’

Miss Wright remained silent. The conversation had taken an uncomfortable turn. She wished she knew what to say next. There were a good many necessary arrangements to be made, in which she needed Nell’s help.

‘When do you go?’ she asked. It was not what she meant to say, and she regretted the words the moment they were uttered.

‘As soon as I possibly can,’ said Nell with unnecessary emphasis. She felt that she must shake the dust of this place from off her feet.

Miss Wright made an effort to be nice.

‘Nell,’ she said, ‘I will be a mother to the boys.’

‘You can’t be that,’ said Nell shortly. ‘Providence has removed their mother, and any one else must be a makeshift; nothing can alter that. I have no doubt you will be kind to them, according to your lights, though you are not fond of children; and one consolation is, they are boys, and will soon go to school, as you remarked just now. Thank Heaven, Rosie is dead!’

This it must be allowed was not a very gracious way of receiving Mary’s well-meant remark; and Nell, not feeling that any more friendly attitude was possible to her, took her leave.

When she was going, she put her hands upon Mary Wright's shoulders and looked in her eyes.

'We have been friends, Mary, haven't we, according to our lights? Well, for the sake of that friendship'—Nell made a desperate effort for composure, and it made her voice sound cold and hard as she finished—'be kind to my dead sister's children.'

'God helping me, I will,' said Mary, and she kept her word.

Nell, though she knew the friendship was ended, and that she would never willingly look upon Mary Wright's face again—she knew this was not just; but 'I am built that way,' she would say, with a shrug of her shoulders—still Nell knew that Mary would be a good stepmother, again with the qualification 'according to her lights.'

As Nell drove home and thought over the conversation her keen sense of humour brought up her old merry smile, and the people she passed said to each other that 'Miss Nell took it well; but, there, Miss Nell was that happy, merry nature she did not feel things as some did—didn't take them to heart.' And she had some compensation: she was touched to find how warm a place she had in the hearts of the Barton people. As for the stern sex, to a man they were conscious of an impending personal loss. A vicar's wife was not a matter of vital importance one way or the other. Miss Wright was highly respected, and would, no doubt, make an excellent vicar's wife; but it was doubtful if she ever made a joke in her life. As for being lively, like Miss Nell, it was not in her. So Nell had her quota of appreciation, and after she was gone loud were the lamentations.

Miss Wright felt that she ran some danger of getting to hate Nell's very name. It was 'Miss Nell did this,' and 'Miss

Nell did use to do the other,' till poor Mary Wright could not have been human if she had not lost patience and declared at last that what Miss Lestrange did was no criterion for her.

But this is anticipating, and Nell had a good deal to go through before she left. The first was an ordeal she would have gladly escaped: the presentation of a testimonial in the shape of a huge Family Bible. It was presented by her fellow-sponsor at little Granville's christening, with a speech in which he expressed a hope that she would live to write the names of her grandchildren upon the blank pages which he assured her were ruled and arranged for the express purpose.

Nell felt that they might have searched the country through before finding a less appropriate token of affection and esteem; but she accepted it in the spirit in which it was given, and made a very pretty, touching little speech, 'not making fun of nobody,' as some one afterwards remarked.

Then the vicar got up and spoke of all Nell had been to him; and, once the floodgates of his eloquence were let loose, Nell thought he would never cease, and into the minds of his hearers there crept an unwilling suspicion that the vicar, now it came to the point, regretted the step he had taken.

'If she'd been Miss Wright now!' they thought. As to the vicar, such an idea had never come into his head. Nell was his sister, and as such he always thought of her; and as for Nell, 'Her husband,' she had once said, 'married some one else, and that ended the matter.' She had done her duty to Basil's children, and as far as lay in her power to Basil's husband; but it is doubtful if she had ever really appreciated her brother-in-law.

Nell packed up all the many possessions she had in numerous packing-cases, and had them all addressed to an old nurse who kept a lodging-house in London.

‘But, Nell, you can’t possibly go there,’ said her brother-in-law, who to all his inquiries as to where Nell was going, and what she was going to do when she got to town, could get only the unsatisfactory reply that she did not know, but that he might address to Mrs Spencer if he wished to communicate with her. At any rate, that was where the children were going while he was on his honeymoon, and that was where she would be for the next few weeks.

Mr Paul could only hope that Nell would settle down quietly and happily with her married sister, though, remembering Nell’s remarks upon the subject in times past, he had very little hope that she would. Still, she was gone; and, in her present mood, it was impossible not to feel that this was a relief, ungrateful as it may appear.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ALONE IN LONDON.



JULIA was very glad to see Nell and her little companions. If a good deal was said about the new paint, the artistic wall-papers, and a good many injunctions given to the effect that small feet and hands might be better employed than in kicking the former and tearing the latter, it may well be excused to a childless widow in a newly decorated house.

With a forbearance which did her credit under the circumstances, Mrs Spencer refrained from saying to Nell 'I told you so;' neither did she make any allusion to Nell's future plans. She simply tried to make the visitors enjoy themselves and feel at home. As far as the two little boys were concerned, this succeeded perfectly; and Nell, though a homeless feeling was growing upon her, enjoyed the air and the peace and quiet after the strain and excitement of the last few weeks. She found Julia far less trying in her own home, where she had a right to dictate; though she was determined that the arrangement should be only temporary.

'When the boys go I go,' she said to herself. 'I don't find the situation of stop-gap desirable.' Where she should go Nell had no idea, nor what she should do. She had an idea that the post of housekeeper, for which her brother-in-law had declared her eminently fitted, would not be so easy

to get. This was the result of various advertisements which she had surreptitiously answered without success.

So, for the present, she played with the little boys and drank in the bracing air, which was rapidly bringing the roses to her cheeks and the brightness to her hair. Only her eyes retained their gravity; and little Mansfield, who was given to precocious remarks, said 'Auntie Nell had not made a proper joke for weeks and weeks, and she's not such great fun now.' Whereat Nell laughed, with a sob at the back of the laugh.

Meantime the honeymoon was drawing to a close, and Mr Paul wrote asking the date of the return of 'our darlings,' and Mrs Paul, though Nell could not bring herself to think of her under this title, wrote to her little stepsons as 'Your affectionate Mother.'

Nell said nothing; but Julia, who had been scornful about 'our darlings,' was loud in her condemnation of the bad taste.

'I never did like that girl, Nell,' she said. 'A designing minx! I always believed her friendship for you was just a means to an end. And as for manners!' Mrs Spencer raised her hands as if words failed her. 'I shall never forget her saying to me that a prolonged residence abroad was always conducive to a lower moral standard; which, considering I had just told her that I had spent a great part of my life abroad, was, to say the least of it, uncalled for. What Peter can have seen in her'——

'Never mind Peter, Julia, and don't be unjust to—Mary,' said Nell. 'The question is, when are the boys to go? I had better take them and nurse to town, and put them into the train for Barton.'

'My dear, why should you go?' began Mrs Spencer.

‘I have to go to town at any rate, and I would rather go now.’

Mrs Spencer’s face fell. ‘You are not going to leave me, Nell? I did hope’——

‘Oh, Julia, spare me any arguments. You are very good and very kind; but I am tired of living in other people’s houses. Oh yes, I know this is different; but the fact is, I must have occupation and an object in life, or I shall go mad, or become a hypochondriac, or a monomaniac, or something.’

‘I see no signs of any of these afflictions,’ said Mrs Spencer drily. ‘But I suppose it is no use talking to a wilful woman. At any rate, Nell, for mother’s sake, promise me that if you tire of looking for an object in life you will let me know, and also that you will embark upon no new life without consulting me.’

To quiet her, Nell gave the required promise before she took her little nephews up to town.

As the train slowly steamed out of Paddington, Nell felt as if her heart were being torn from her, and she turned to leave the noisy crowded station alone. Despite her many friends, alone in London!

She had taken rooms with her mother’s old maid. The locality was not all that Mrs Spencer could have desired; but it was something that Nell was with some one who knew the family.

Nell knew enough about London to know that her rooms were cheap, and that her bill at the end of the week was very small; but she thought it quite possible that Mrs Smith was catering for her as for herself, and remained then and even afterwards in blissful ignorance of the fact that Mrs Spencer was subsidising Mrs Smith, and had written reams on the

necessity of 'looking after' Nell in every sense of the word. So that, even if Mrs Smith had not been a kind woman and fond of Nell, it would have been worth her while to make Nell comfortable, or, to be correct, to try to do so.

'This,' said Nell as she started on a dreary round of visits to agencies in the search for an occupation, 'is what heroines do in books; but heroines invariably end in marrying dukes or coming into some large fortune, or something else equally improbable happens to make all end well. But I feel as if this were the end somehow. I don't believe, even if an eligible duke did "come along," as the Americans say, that he would tempt me to forsake single bliss; and as for the large fortune, there isn't one in the family that is not appropriated. So it seems to me that a post as nursery-governess is the greatest piece of luck that is likely to befall me.'

What oppressed Nell most, as she went her weary way, was the want of brightness in the faces she met.

'They look so worried,' she commented. 'I very seldom see a happy face, and then it is either some benevolent-looking old man, presumably looking back on a satisfactory and well-spent life, or some very young persons looking forward to happiness to which they will very probably never attain, or which, if they do attain to it, will turn to dust and ashes in their mouths.' From which it will be seen that Nell Lestranger ran a very fair chance of becoming a misanthropic, embittered woman. The continued blows of misfortune had clouded the sunny nature; and Nell had made the discovery, which others have made before her, that high spirits, though they are not a gift to be despised, are no reliable support in time of trouble and no bulwark against the buffets of this world.

Meanwhile, even the small piece of luck which Nell hoped for in the shape of an engagement as nursery-governess did

not come. Nell began to wonder whether women, except as domestic servants, were wanted in England at all, and whimsically imagined herself in cap and apron acting as parlour-maid or nurse ; but her promise of consulting her sister before she undertook any new work would have stopped her if she had seriously entertained this idea. Things had not come to that pass at present ; and Nell had a sufficient sense of justice to know that it would be hardly fair to her family to do a thing of that kind while her sister's home was open to her. Besides, she had a hundred or so in the bank, and she was in no great hurry to embark upon a new life.

It seemed to Nell that she had come to a resting-place on life's journey ; and so, as she did not imagine that life held anything worth having for her, she did not see that she need show any eagerness to find that object in life which, after all, would only be an artificial object when all was said and done.

The Kilpatricks were much hurt that Nell did not come to stay with them.

'You could find something to do just as well from our house as you can from your present abode,' said Mrs Kilpatrick ; 'better in fact, if you will excuse my saying so, because the address is a better one.'

Mrs Kilpatrick had absolutely declined to be dropped by Nell, as she put it ; and Nell, while she refused to be dragged into society or to attempt to take her old place among her friends, could not refuse her friends' advances.

Mabel Kilpatrick was happily and well married. 'So you see, dear,' said Mrs Kilpatrick triumphantly to her husband, 'good looks are not everything ; and though you did say that Nell threw our girl quite in the shade, here's Nell penniless and unmarried, while Mabel'——

‘Has money and is married,’ replied her husband. ‘All the same, nine men out of ten would rather have Nell without a penny.’ Which, whether it was true or not—probably not—was a most unfatherly remark; but Mr Kilpatrick was a staunch admirer both of Nell and her pluck.

Mrs Kilpatrick, her own daughter being off her hands, would have liked nothing better than to have taken Nell into her house, and see her settled in life.

But Nell knew very well the kind of settlement Mrs Kilpatrick contemplated for her, and would have none of it, preferring perversely to stay in her dingy lodgings and look for ‘impossible situations,’ as Mrs Kilpatrick and Mrs Spencer agreed in calling Nell’s ‘object in life.’

Nell got into the habit of dropping into the Kilpatricks’ to relate her adventures in the search for a place; and, though generally managing to give a humorous turn to her accounts, she betrayed unconsciously a good deal of the mortification she occasionally felt at the rebuffs she received and the slights she experienced.

Mrs Kilpatrick was often more indignant than amused, and would ask her husband with much irritation how they were to bring Nell to ‘reason.’ ‘Here is our home open to her. It would be an interest in going into society to have Nell with us; and there is Mrs Spencer complaining of loneliness, though to be sure she never is alone; and Nell insists upon living in impossible lodgings looking for an impossible object in life. Why can’t she come to us, and make us her object in life?’ wound up Mrs Kilpatrick in an injured tone.

But Mr Kilpatrick consoled her. ‘Give her her head. Let her have a few months of this. She will never get anything to do; or, if she does, she will soon throw it up. She has had her way all her life—the worse for her that it

was so—and she is feeling a bit sore and not wanted just now. And it will do her no harm to find that she can't always have her own way.'

'I don't know about that,' said Mrs Kilpatrick. 'I am afraid it will harden her.'

Mr Kilpatrick shook his head. 'It is softening her already.'

Mrs Kilpatrick was surprised at the remark, but did not say so; and upon reflection she began to see that her husband showed a much greater power of observation than she would have given him credit for. She consequently took his advice, and let Nell have her head.

So Nell's friends watched over her to the best of their ability, and Mrs Smith, too, looked after her comfort; and, if Nell had but known it, she was far better off than most girls in the position in which she found herself.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘SUDDEN THE WORST TURNS THE BEST TO THE BRAVE.’



HERE was another habit into which Nell had fallen since she had been in town, and that was the habit of frequenting the deserted City churches. She felt less lonely in them; in fact, the time she spent in the quiet old City churches was the only time when that weary sense of loneliness left her. She tried sometimes to account for this, but could not.

As has been said, Nell was not religious—‘not a bit religious,’ as little Mansfield with childish candour had remarked; and the loss of her sister had if anything turned her from seeking consolation in the hope of another world. The way she argued with herself was this: It might be a consolation to other people the hope of a reunion with their loved ones; but Basil holding a palm in her hand and singing hymns would not be the Basil she ached to see—the Basil who danced hornpipes on her new stamped velvet chairs, and was always doing kind, loving, impulsive things. Now this latest event complicated matters. Where did Basil come in now that her husband and children were claimed by another woman?

It was all a tangle, Nell felt, and she could not unravel it. Nell would not like to think of not seeing her mother again. When her sister had died, the thought of the long life before her without Basil dwarfed the thought of the longer life

beyond the grave ; but now this life did not seem so long or of such paramount importance ; and so Nell used every day to go and sit in some old oak carved seat, with perhaps Gibbons's lovely carved figures before her, and rest. More than that she did not do, or pretend to do. Sometimes a vergier or some deaconess in charge of the church would look at the bright-haired young woman, in her deep mourning, and wonder why she sat there so quietly, not praying or appearing to be very devout, nor appearing very poor or miserable, for Nell was well-dressed and in very good health. She was not actually miserable, only tired and lonely ; tired of everything and everybody, and very lonely, but not at all desirous of companionship.

Mr Kilpatrick was right. Nell was much better left alone. And so they all did leave her alone.

One day, as usual, Nell was sitting in the old church into which she so often turned after one of her fruitless visits to a certain agency, where they were, if the truth be known, getting a little tired of trying to get her anything, for if Nell did receive an offer from any of their clients and would have taken the poor post put at her disposal, Mrs Spencer and Mrs Kilpatrick invariably vetoed it.

For the first time Nell knelt down in her seat. A passionate desire for light and hope beyond the tomb seized her. When she raised her head some time after, she found to her surprise that she was not alone. Another straggler had come in, a man with blonde hair, who was kneeling farther forward in the church.

Nell felt herself taking an interest in him.

'I never heard him come in,' she said. 'He is evidently a gentleman, and thinks he is alone. I suppose he did not see me. He really seems to be praying. I wonder if he has



And so Nell used every day to go and sit in some old carved
seat . . . and rest.

committed some sin of which he is repenting? Let us hope he will find consolation.’

A feeling as if she were intruding came over Nell. The man thought he was alone, or he would not remain there with bowed-down head, she was sure. She got up to go; but, as luck, or ill-luck—or was it Providence?—would have it, she let her umbrella drop, and the worshipper in front raised his head quickly and turned round.

Nell stood transfixed.

‘Granville!’ she murmured, and stood staring at him.

Mr Neville, for it was he, came quickly down the aisle towards Nell, and held out his hand.

‘You need not be afraid of me, Miss Lestrangle. You were in my thoughts at that moment, and I was wondering how I was to convey to you my sorrow for your loss and—for—for my last interview with—you, without intruding upon you.’

‘Oh, don’t!’ began Nell. Then with a perception that she had better be honest, and abstain from polite truism, she said, ‘We both have something to be sorry for, and we have both suffered for the mistakes we have made. I am glad we have met, and here.’ And she turned to go.

‘May I walk with you?’ he asked. ‘You are in town on one of your flying visits, I suppose. I saw your loss in the paper, and I was sorry. I wanted to write, but did not venture.’

‘Thank you,’ said Nell simply. She did not know whether she ought to allow him to walk with her; but eventually decided that she would. ‘There have been a good many changes. We lost all our money through Moxon’s failure, and that killed—her. Mr Paul has, as we all expected, married again.’

'And you?' began Mr Neville.

'I am in town,' said Nell.

'Don't think me impertinent, please; but with whom are you staying? May I come and call?'

Nell was rather surprised, and began to think that piety was indeed a fraud, and replied, 'Thank you, no. I do not receive visitors. I am living in lodgings alone.'

'What on earth for?' exclaimed Mr Neville, in a reminder of his old tone of authority.

And Nell said rather haughtily, 'I think you forget.'

'Forget, Nell? Would to God I could forget! Oh, I have forgotten something,' as he saw Nell preparing to hail a hansom to get rid of him. 'I—give me five minutes, Miss Lestrangle. That time when I saw you, and spoke as I had no right to speak, I was, though I did not know it, a widower. You have not heard, of course. My wife has been dead a year.'

Mrs Granville Neville, who was a great horsewoman, had been thrown from her horse on that very day, and had died a few hours after the accident. 'I had my punishment then, for if I had waited—— But perhaps even if I had waited it would have been no use?' He looked at Nell; but her face was bent down.

'Nell, could you have—can you forgive me?'

Nell looked up. Mr Neville had his answer.

The dull, dreary street was illuminated.

'At last, Nell! Oh, Nell, what a lot of our lives we have wasted, my darling!'

'Not wasted, Granville. At least I don't regret it now. I'm a real heroine, after all! When I came up to town first and looked for something to do, having lost all my

fortune, and—everything, I felt like a heroine in a novel; only, I said to myself, they always marry dukes or some one grand. I could not marry any one but you.’

Mr Neville nearly crushed the hand resting upon his arm.

And the two wandered on and on, unheeding of time or place till they found themselves near Victoria. And a sudden inspiration seized Nell.

‘Granville,’ she said, ‘let us go down to Brighton and tell Julia!’

Julia’s delight knew no bounds. She alternately cried and laughed; and Nell was unable to withstand her entreaties that she should take up her abode with her until——

And as Mr Neville added his entreaties, Nell—who was just as anxious now to defer to him as he was anxious not to dictate to her—agreed to stay.

It was to be a quiet wedding. Mr Neville was just as desirous of this as Nell. He was a rich man now, and Nell was making a better match than Mabel, as Mr Kilpatrick wickedly pointed out to his wife; but she did not grudge Nell her happiness.

And Barton? There the news was heard with universal satisfaction. The people felt that the Family Bible had been prophetic, and only regretted that they should not see Miss Nell in her wedding-dress. The bell-ringers decided to ring the bells on the day of the wedding wherever she was married, and the youths of Barton expressed their intention of taking the horses out of her carriage if she came to Barton for her honeymoon; but Nell did not require this service at their hands.

Mr Paul was never so astonished in his life.

‘Then she must have cared for him after all!’ he said, half doubtful still.

'Of course she did,' said his wife in her quick way. 'Do you mean to say you did not know that?'

'No, I certainly did not; but if so, why on earth'——

'Didn't she marry him? Well, if you ask me, I should say that it was a stern sense of duty towards you, or rather Basil's children.'

Mr Paul did not like the idea at all. 'I should be very sorry to think that,' he said with wrinkled brow. 'It is a sacrifice no one is called upon to make—that is to say, it is one that I should never have allowed her to make if I had known.'

'You may take my word for it that she did deliberately make the sacrifice. I have always admired her pluck.' From which it will be seen that the second Mrs Paul was capable of more justice to Nell than Nell was capable of towards her.

Mr Paul was decidedly disturbed by Mrs Paul's remarks. She was very outspoken, and in her relief at this solution of an uncomfortable situation she could afford to do Nell justice.

Mr Paul felt very uncomfortable. 'I wish I had known,' was all he said; and he did not reply to his wife's remark that 'It would not have made any difference. Nell always would take her own way; and, as all had ended well, there was nothing to regret.'

But for the rest of that day and for many days there was a wrinkle on Mr Paul's brow; and when the pair sent off a beautiful piece of jewellery to Nell, he packed it himself, and put on a scrap of paper: 'In memory of a plucky and unsuspected sacrifice, from your grateful brother, Peter.'

So Nell knew that Peter's only fault had been blindness, and felt more kindly to him; but she told Mr Neville that she would rather not go to Barton before starting for India.

So the two little boys came to be pages to Auntie Nell, and Mr and Mrs Paul sent kind messages.

And this time there was no hitch.

'Granville, what made you go to that City church?' Nell asked him one day.

'A merciful Providence,' he replied promptly, but not irreverently.

'I dare say,' said Nell; 'but what mundane means did it take to send you to such a place, the last place in the world I should have expected to meet you?'

Mr Neville considered. 'It was this way. I had just been to see my solicitor about that property I have come in for, and they had been congratulating me on the good fortune, and I was feeling depressed at the thought of the irony of the situation, and the little value the good fortune was to me without you; and then a sense of loneliness came over me, and I saw the church door open, and I went in.' He paused. 'I am not a very religious man, Nell; but I have thought a good deal more since all my trouble. At that moment I was feeling as though if this world were all it was a poor lookout; and I believe I went in to pray that I might see you in the next, if the truth be known. Once in there, I went over my past life, and I felt sorry for a good deal and wished I could tell you so; but I did not know how. I never thought you would leave that—Barton—and I did not know that I ought to ask you. And then you appeared like an angel of light.'

'Oh, Granville!' expostulated Nell.

'I don't mean to be irreverent, my dear; but that was what I felt.'

'But, Granville, I am not properly religious,' said Nell. 'According to Mansfield, I am not a bit religious.'

'I don't suppose we should either of us come up to the standard of that small pharisee ; but, my dear, we have learnt by experience, and we must try and help each other to live up to the light that is given us.'

Nell's wedding-day dawned bright and joyous, and the Barton bells rang out in merry peals, and every one who knew her thought kindly of the bright, smiling girl who had lived among them for three years, and done her duty to them all so pluckily. And old James, as he stood outside the church porch, which he had been sweeping, leaning on his broom and listening to the bells, said with a grunt :

'She were a plucky one, she were, and had more go in her little finger, she had, than '—it is to be feared that the jerk old James gave with his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the Vicarage was meant for the present Mrs Paul—'has in her whole body, and a pleasant way she had with her ! A body never minded what he did for her nor what inconvenience she put un to.'

Which mendacious speech Nell would have smiled to hear. But such is the way of the world.

So Nell's wedding-cake was eaten, her wedding-cards put away in the Bible in many a Barton cottage, with many a heartfelt wish for her happiness with the man who had, as they thought, so patiently waited for his bride, and for the plucky girl who had brightened so many lives by her conscientious discharge of uncongenial duty.

THE END.

